

Muggle clubs never really suited Harry. The music is too loud, the beer too watery ... the girls too easy.

Oh well. He's here. He might as well make the best of it.

Ron is enjoying himself at least, Harry thinks. Gyrating his crotch into the butt of some girl with flowing blond hair. Come to think of it, she looks a lot like Fleur, Harry decides as he tips his beer back. He winces slightly. It really does taste awful.

"Oi, Harry!" Ron yells at him. "Get out here!"

Another girl has joined him and Fleur's lookalike. Ron's eyes are huge.

Harry shakes his head. Girls in ripped shirts and tight jeans? No, thanks. That's not his idea of a good time.

He finishes off his beer and turns back to the bar to get another one. He can feel a buzz coming on, which surprises him, seeing how the beer tastes like cat piss and couldn't possibly produce a *good* buzz.

He drinks the next one quickly. How many has that been? Four? He'd better stop after the next one. He takes it and moves back to his post near the dance floor, staring out at the heaving crowd.

Four girls are surrounding Ron at this point. Harry laughs. Ron must think this is the best birthday ever.

"Hey, Harry," someone says behind him. "Sorry I'm late."

Harry turns around, and sucks in his breath.

Since when did *she* look so beautiful?

"Hermione," he says stupidly. "No – no problem." He nods his head towards Ron. "He didn't really want to wait for you."

"Oh!" Hermione says in surprise, and giggles. "Well, I guess I'm not surprised. Muggle girls are quite easy, sometimes."

"You look nice," Harry blurts out.

Hermione looks down at her outfit. "Thank you," she says, slightly confused. "It's nothing special." Just a green top and jeans. Nothing tight, nothing sexy.

"It's better than – than *that* girl over there," Harry says, pointing to a redhead with a short skirt and tube top. "Or *that* one," he adds, pointing to Fleur's twin, who is now cupping Ron's bottom.

The two of them stand next to each other, watching Ron.

Harry clears his throat. "This isn't – hard for you to watch or anything, is it?"

Hermione shakes her head. "I'm fine," she says. "Honestly. I'm happy he can have a good time again."

"He does love you, you know."

"I know. But – but we're not meant to be together – not like that. It just took us a while to realise it." Hermione sighs. "It's better this way."

"Could I buy you a drink?" Harry offers.

Hermione smiles and nods, allowing him to lead her to the bar. The bartender plunks down two beers – *I really should stop*, Harry thinks – and Hermione takes hers, turning to Harry. "A toast," she says. "To Ron – for finally getting lucky."

"He was lucky to have you," Harry tells her.

Hermione shakes her head. "Well, he never *had* me, you know," she blurts, turning slightly pink.

Harry nearly misses his mouth. "But wha --? He said --"

"As if Ron would tell you the truth about something like that," Hermione scoffs. "No, we never had sex. But I bet he will with one of those girls out there."

Harry raises his eyebrows. "Are you sure you're not sad? I mean –"

"No, Harry, I'm not upset. Stop worrying about me! It's been over a year, at this point. You can drop this super-sensitive act." She pauses. "Not that it's a bad thing," she says hastily. "I just mean – I'm Ok. Really. Now, let's drink." She tips her head back.

Harry finds himself studying her neck. It's shimmering slightly. Is that 1) how it always is; 2) makeup; or 3) the beer taking its effect on his senses? Harry has a sudden urge to kiss her neck.

Instead, he brings the beer to his lips. But his eyes stay on her neck, even after she's finished drinking her first beer and he can barely notice that she's continuing to chatter away about work and such. She orders two more bottles, then two more. Her hand motions are becoming more exaggerated, and his vision is getting blurrier and blurrier. But he can still see her neck, glimmering.

"Hermione! You're here!"

The both look up. Ron is stumbling towards them, his arms around the brunette and Fleur's long-lost twin.

"Happy birthday, Ron," she says slowly, giggling. "I'm Hermione."

"Oh, this is Anne and Charlotte," Ron says quickly. "Listen, we're going to, um, I'm taking them home. So I'll see you later, all right?"

Harry nods. "Have fun, um, taking them home," he says, grinning.

He just makes out Ron's wink. Everything is so out of focus.

It's kind of cool really.

"Bye," Hermione calls as Ron presses back through the crowd. She turns back to Harry. Her neck glimmers.

"Do you want to dance?" he slurs abruptly.

Hermione stares at him blankly for a moment. Dancing? What? Oh, right. "I'd love to," she squeals, grabbing his hands and placing them on her waist, rocking her body back and forth.

“Er – Hermione? I meant out there.” Harry points to the heaving crowd of beautiful people on the dance floor.

“Oh, right. Let’s go.” She tugs at his hand, pulling him behind her. When they reach the centre, she turns towards him, very slowly. She lifts her arms in the air and closes her eyes and sways her hips back and forth.

And her neck shimmers.

Harry follows her moves, watching her.

He can’t take his eyes off of her.

She dances closer to him, breathing in, breathing out. She’s looking up at him, and he’s looking right back. She presses her body right up against his. And he reaches out to touch her cheek, his thumb pressing gently against her skin.

Another couple bumps into them, and they both stumble. Hermione steps away, looking down. But her heart is still beating a lot faster than it should. Why?

Harry looks over the heads of the people surrounding them. He turns back to Hermione, who is looking at him.

Was she always this beautiful? Were her lips always that full, her eyes always that wide? And her neck ...

“Let’s go,” Harry says abruptly. “Some fresh air.”

Hermione follows him as they stumble out of the club. It’s raining. She tilts her head up, the raindrops falling across her face.

Harry can feel the warmth of her hand in his, and there’s something so beautiful about something as simple as that. And he wants to touch her face again, badly. He pulls her towards him, and he reaches out eagerly. But she giggles and pulls away, spinning them around and around. Oh, God. He’s getting dizzy. She’s getting dizzy. And he just starts laughing, and he pulls her back to him, and she lets

him. And she looks straight into his eyes, and she's so beautiful, and he can't help himself.

And he presses his lips against her, very gently. And she kisses him back, shyly, like she doesn't know what's going to happen next. She feels a buzz in her head and his tongue moving inside of her mouth, and it's absolutely beautiful.

Harry pulls his wand out of his pocket. "Come on," he slurs. "There's an alley over that way."

He leads Hermione down the alley. She pulls out her own wand and he nods at her, and they Apparate.

Harry's apartment is significantly warmer.

And *that's* when they notice that, yes, they are quite wet after all.

"Let me, um, get you a towel?" Harry sort of asks Hermione. Her long, curly hair is soaked, and the water is running down her neck into the area between her breasts.

Hermione laughs and shakes her head, but that only makes her dizzier. She walks towards him slowly, taking his hand and looking up at him. She's so beautiful. He bends his head down to touch his lips to hers, another question. Hermione smiles and opens her mouth slightly, and he places his hands on her waist, kissing her eagerly, and with more intensity. He lifts her, and she wraps her legs around his waist. He presses her against a wall, and kisses down her wet neck as she runs her fingers through his hair.

She raises his chin with one finger and presses their mouths together. She unwraps her legs, putting her hands on his chest and pushing him slowly backwards. Where is she leading him? To the – he gulps, feeling his jeans tighten.

The door is closes, and she presses him against it, reaching to turn the doorknob. She continues to push him backward until his knees hit the side of his bed and he falls backwards onto it.

Hermione looks down at him, and she smiles. And Harry smiles back. "Come here," he says, reaching for her. Hermione lies down next to him, and he rolls to face her. He tucks her hair behind his ear, moving his hand down her throat. And then he takes her waist and he pulls her on top of him, and she holds herself up with her hands to each side of her head. He lifts his hand up to touch her face, and she kisses his palm. And then she bends down to kiss him. And they kiss and kiss and kiss, and she raises her arms above her head and he tucks his hands under her shirt and lifts it over her head. And she unbuttons his shirt, kissing her way down his chest, pushing it back and over his shoulders. He reaches around her back, unclasping her bra. And it falls away. And the rest of their clothes fall away, until there's just them. And it's beautiful.

She presses their foreheads together as he pushes himself gently inside of her. She closes her eyes, but he whispers, "Keep them open. Please." And she does.

And when it's over, he kisses her cheeks, then her forehead. They're sweating, and they're still wet from the rain, and it's beautiful.

They're lying on their backs next to each other, just holding hands and looking up at his ceiling fan. She rolls onto her side and rests her head on his chest, breathing deeply. He strokes her hair, and whispers, very quietly,

"I think I'm in love with you, Hermione Granger."

But she's already asleep.

She wakes up with his arm wrapped around her waist and a headache. Who is HE, anyway? Some stranger? Or worse yet – someone she knows? She rolls over, slowly, so as not to wake up this person who is, for some inexplicable reason, in bed with her, and a gasp escapes her lips.

No way. No how.

What is HE doing here?

Ok, of all the people ... Hermione shakes her head angrily. Stupid, stupid, stupid. How could she be such an idiot?

I'm never drinking again, she vows.

Yeah, you keep telling yourself that, sweetie.

Her clothes were strewn across the floor. Her shirt was right next to the bed. She snatched it off the ground and pulled it over her head.

The movement startled him, and he opened his eyes quickly, watching Hermione's back disappear as the clingy yellow shirt went over her head. "Morning," he says sleepily, pressing his face into the pillow.

"Don't 'hello' me," she snaps. "Don't you even dare. I can't believe – I mean, we didn't – did we?"

He turns his face so that he's looking into hers. "Well," he says slowly. "I'm naked. You're naked. I think you can figure it out."

"Not helpful right now. I'm such an idiot. I can't believe –"

"Hermione, it's not a huge deal!"

"Oh, right, losing my virginity to the boy who lived when I was drunk out of my mind isn't a problem!"

Harry gapes at her. "Hermione –"

She slides her jeans up her legs, and he has a sudden urge to kiss her thighs. But she's turning away from him, and he can't do anything about it.

"Hermione!" he repeats.

"What, Harry?" she asks angrily, shoving one foot and then the other into her high heels.

He pauses. "Never mind."

She tosses her hair back, pulling it into a bun. "I need to go – I'm going to be – going to be late for work –"

"Wait, you're just leaving? What about breakfast? Can I get you anything to drink? Tea?"

"What you *can* get me, Harry, is Tylenol. I have a splitting headache."

He just stares at Hermione. With her hair piled haphazardly on her head, her jeans crumpled slightly, and her eyes flashing.

She's beautiful.

"Never mind, Harry," she says. "I need to leave right this instant. Where's my wand?" She bends down and looks under his bed, her shirt riding up in the back. Harry just stares at that skin – is that wrong of him? It feels almost ... *dirty*.

After seeing *all* of her last night? Really?

Hermione emerges with her wand in one hand and a triumphant look on her face. Harry stares straight into her eyes. It's a very strange moment, honestly. Hermione, with a few dust mites in her tangled hair and Harry, with a thin white bed sheet wrapped around his waist.

And then he leans forward, and he kisses her lips, still frozen in a smug smile after retrieving her wand. It's a chaste kiss, by any standards, especially those that they set last night. But Hermione can feel her cheeks heating. This was why she was with him last night. For *this*. She wants to jump back on the bed and let him pull her

clothing off all over again. She wants him to cradle her in his arms. She wants to kiss his chin. She wants to – but she can't.

Hermione pulls away, smiling slightly. “I'll see you later, Harry,” she says, turning away.

“Hermione --”

She's gone. Just like that, she's gone.

Harry shakes his head and rolls over, burying his face in the pillow.

“I'm never drinking again,” he mutters to himself.

“Harry? Oi! Open up, you wanker!”

Harry rolls over. He thought that steady beat was just his head, throbbing. But no, it’s Ron, banging on his apartment door.

He’s still naked.

“Harry!” Ron bellows. “I know you’re in there!”

Harry gets up and pulls on his boxers and a pair of slacks. Rubbing his eyes furiously, he stumbles out of his bedroom and to the door. He opens it and Ron walks in. “Didn’t you hear me the first five minutes?” he asks. “One of your neighbours came out to tell me to keep it down.”

“Sorry, I was sleeping.” Harry rubs his hands through his hair. “What time is it, anyway?” Ron studies his friend. “Half past twelve,” he says. “You were *sleeping*? Harry, you *never* sleep past nine. What’s with you?”

“I’m just tired.”

Ron raises his eyebrows, and Harry looks away. “You look a mess, mate,” he says.

“Thanks.” Harry coughs. “So – um, how were, um, Anne and Charlotte?”

Ron’s eyes gleam. “Oh, fantastic! And they both gave me their tele-thingy numbers.” He frowns. “You’ll show me how to use that properly, won’t you?”

“Sure,” Harry says.

Ron looks down at the carpet. “You’ve got muddy footprints all over the place.” He crouches down. “Hang on a minute. There are *two* sets of footprints here.”

Harry gulps.

Ron follows the footsteps out of the main room, down the hallway, and into Harry's room. Harry follows him, breathing heavily. "Looks like you got lucky too, eh?" Ron calls to his friend.

"It was nothing, Ron, I –"

Harry stops. Ron is standing at the foot of his bed, holding up a lacy black bra.

Harry swallows. He remembers unclasping it and watching her slide it down her arms and pressing her chest to his. And he remembers kissing his way down her neck, and the moan she let out when he kissed her breasts.

"You call this 'nothing'?" Ron asks, shaking the bra at Harry, grinning. "Who was it? Who's the lucky lady? Tell me!"

Harry shakes his head.

"What?" Ron asks, dumbfounded. "You're not even going to *tell* me who she is?"

"I – I can't," Harry stutters, for way of explanation. "I just – I can't."

Ron frowns. "Do I know her?"

Harry laughs. "I'm not saying anything."

Ron furrows his brow. "You don't – don't regret it or anything, do you, mate? You seem kind of ... uptight about it."

Harry blinks. He remembers holding her hips as he slid inside of her. He remembers her wet hair dripping on his chest. He remembers how her body felt pressed against his – warm and right. He remembers looking into her eyes as his legs felt like they were losing circulation, and he remembers thinking about how beautiful she looked, with her damp hair pressed against her sweaty face.

No, he didn't regret it. Not one bit.

But did she?

She was so angry this morning – did she think it was a bad move?
Did she regret it?

Ron's laugh snaps Harry out of his reverie. "Well, whoever she is,
she's clearly got you gagging for more."

Harry nods slowly. He wants her right here, right now.

Yes, he's definitely gagging for more.

Hermione collapses on the couch in her sitting room the moment she gets home from work. It was a long day, filled with three *endless* meetings and Seamus's *tenth* attempt to get her to go out to dinner with her. She has ink on her shirt and her hair still smells like *him*, and the salad she had eaten was a pretty pathetic excuse for a lunch. Needless to say, it has been a day that was much too long for a girl with a hangover.

Hermione rubs her neck. She can still feel his lips pressed against it, and she shivers. She can feel his hands caressing her face. Her legs wrapped around his naked body. His breath on her skin.

He was inside of her. Harry. And it was painful, and it was exciting, and it was scary, and it was wonderful. And the look in his eyes as he released – Hermione shivers. There was something there. She doesn't really know how to describe just what she saw, but it sent goose bumps up and down her arms.

There's a knock on the door, and Hermione starts, surprised. She gets up slowly, and walks to the door, opening it slowly.

It's him.

Hermione gulps. "Hi," she says.

"Hey," says Harry softly. "Can I – can I come in?"

Hermione moves out of the way, and Harry steps into her apartment. He looks around. He's been here so many times. So why does this feel any different? Why is he so bloody nervous?

Hermione closes the door quietly, and Harry turns to face her. "Um, how are you?" he manages.

She shrugs. "Fine, I guess. I had a pretty busy day but – it was fine. And you?"

Harry nods. "I'm ... fine."

There's silence.

Is this really how it's supposed to be with your best friend?

"Listen, Harry, about – about what happened ..." Hermione swallows. How can she put this when she doesn't even really know how she feels about the whole situation? She doesn't know whether she should tell him that it was all her fault for getting so drunk, or yell at him for taking advantage of the situation, or how she really liked those little kisses he kept planting on her collarbone, or that she wants him to kiss her lips with the same intensity that he had last night, but this time, she wants to remember every single moment.

"Hermione?"

She looks up. "Yes?"

Harry pauses, and looks away. "Um, never mind."

Silence.

"Ok."

Pause.

"Harry –"

"Yes?"

"Never mind."

And they stand there, just looking at each other. And at the very same moment, they reach for each other. He grabs her face in his hands and he kisses her roughly, and she kisses him back, and he tastes like peppermint and cinnamon and something else that she didn't taste last night.

He pulls away. "We really – really should stop," he breathes.

"Right," she says, wrapping her arms around his neck and pressing her hips against his. And she lifts her face and kisses his lips lightly, and then a bit harder. And he groans as he pulls her as close to him

as he can, and they stagger to the sofa, and he gently lays her across it, holding himself over her.

He kisses her neck.

"We – really – should – stop," Hermione mumbles, wrapping her fingers in his hair. She gasps as he tucks one hand under the waistband of her pants, and arches her back as he slides a finger inside of her. "Harry – please –"

He takes his hand out of her pants, and she grabs the bottom of his shirt, pulling it over his head. He rolls off the sofa onto the floor and pulls her down on top of him, sliding his hands up her shirt. And then her shirt is off and her pants are in a pile near her feet, and his are thrown up on the couch, and she has no idea where their underwear is, but she does know that she is feeling a lot more nervous than she did the first time, and at the same time, she feels a strange kind of peace. She's trembling all over, and so is he.

"Are you Ok?" he whispers, kissing her forehead.

Hermione nods, breathing heavily as he slowly lowers himself.

And it feels just as good as the first time.

This isn't possible.

Hermione stares down at the small object clutched in her hand.

How could this have happened?

She's finding it difficult to breath.

She pulls it closer to her face.

The word PREGNANT is written in blue font.

She's pregnant.

Why me?

Hermione sits down on the edge of the bathtub, her eyes stinging with tears.

This wasn't supposed to happen.

“What am I going to tell mum and dad?” she wonders aloud. “And my friends – what am I going to tell *Ron*?”

Isn't she forgetting someone kind of important in this?

Hermione wipes her eyes and stands up. There must be some mistake. She looks down at the word.

Pregnant.

She drops it on the floor and walks out of the bathroom, walking to her closet.

Soon, she won't be able to fit into any of these clothes.

She puts her hand on her stomach. It's warm, but she can't feel anything. Can there really be a baby inside.

Hermione lets her bathrobe drop to the floor. She looks in the mirror attached to the inside of her closet door.

And then she starts to cry, tears rolling down her face as she pulls out a robe. Sobbing as she brushes out the numerous knots in her hair. And wiping her eyes once more as she pulls her wand out to Apparate.

Harry is sitting reading *The Daily Prophet* when he hears a movement behind him. He jumps up, clutching his wand as he spins around.

And Hermione is standing before him.

“You scared me,” he says, lowering his wand and swallowing. How long has it been since he last saw her?

A month. Since he woke up holding her in his arms for the second time. And they had dressed, said goodbye, and that was that. Neither one of them was able to make a connection after that. It was too hard, too dangerous – they were both afraid of what would happen. How Ron would feel. What people would think.

“I’m sorry to just barge in like this, but ... we’ve – we’ve got a problem.”

Harry frowns. “A problem?”

Hermione pauses, looking away. How can she put this?

“Harry, I’m – I’m – I’m late.”

She looks back up into his eyes. And he just looks utterly confused.

“Come again?”

Hermione rolls her eyes. “I’m *late*.” His expression doesn’t change. “Do you know absolutely nothing about females?” she snaps.

“What the bloody hell are you talking about? Look, Hermione, if you have a point, make it, Ok?”

“You’re serious? You honestly don’t know what the phrase *I’m late* means?”

“I obviously don’t, so why don’t you tell me!”

"I'M PREGNANT!" Hermione screams at him. She doesn't really know why she's screaming. She can feel a lump in her throat, and all of a sudden, she's very dizzy.

Harry stares at her in disbelief. "Pregnant," he repeats stupidly.

Hermione closes her eyes and nods. "I'm pregnant," she says again.

She feels weak. She walks over to his sofa and sits down, resting her elbows on her knees and her head in her hands.

Harry watches her for a few moments. He can see her chest, rising and falling. And he wants to hold her, wants to kiss the tears off her cheeks and tell her everything is going to be Ok.

He's going to be a father. Harry swallows. He's going to have a child.

She's going to have his child. Hermione. His best friend. The girl he's in love with.

What?

No. He can't be in love with her. That's not possible. Two nights can't possibly change a lifetime of friendship.

Can they?
She's having his child.

They're having a child.

"Her-Hermione?" he says softly. He walks over to the sofa, kneeling in front of her. He gently pulls her hands away from her face. Her cheeks are wet and she's gasping for air.

And she's beautiful.

"What are we going to do, Harry?" she whispers. "What can we do?"

Harry gingerly pushes a few strands of her hair away from her face. "We'll figure it out, won't we? It's going to be all right. I'm – I'm not going anywhere."

Hermione looks into his eyes. “Are you – are you sure?”

They stare at each other for a few seconds before he raises his lips and kisses her forehead.

“Positive.”

“Hermione? Are you ready?”

“Just a minute.”

She’s sitting on the edge of her bed. Her hands are clasped tightly in her lap. She’s wearing a nice outfit, like that’s going to make much of a difference to her parents when she tells them. How *is* she going to tell them? “Mum, dad, this is Harry, surely you remember him. Anyway, we got drunk one night and had sex, and then we had sex the following night, and – well, we weren’t really thinking, so we didn’t use any protection, and I’m pregnant now – is that Ok with you two?” Stupid.

Harry walks into the room. “Hermione? Come on.”

Hermione shakes her head. “I – I can’t do this, Harry. They’re my parents, and they’re terribly old-fashioned, and there’s not way they’d ever understand this. They’ll murder you – they’ll lock me up in a tower for the rest of my life, and I’ll lose the baby, and then I’ll just die.”

“Hermione, don’t you think you’re being just a little bit overdramatic? No one is going to kill me, and no one is going to die. It’s going to be Ok.”

Hermione nods, shakes her head, and nods again. “Right,” she says.

Harry studies her. God, he wants to touch her. But he can’t. They had decided it would be less complicated if they didn’t sleep in the same bed, didn’t move their relationship ‘to the next level’. Instead, they decided that Hermione would move into Harry’s apartment, and that they’d tell Ron that it was just to save money, until they would be prepared to tell them the truth. And they sleep in separate bedrooms and brush their teeth and take showers in separate bathrooms and when Harry’s watching the telly, Hermione is reading in her bedroom, and when Hermione’s using her computer in the main room, Harry’s out for lunch. And there is nothing sexual about the situation at all.

But the feelings are there, all the same. Coursing through each of them as they pass each other in the hallway in the morning. As they eat breakfast. As they leave for their respective jobs. As they eat

dinner after nine hours of sitting in their respective offices. As they get ready for bed.

There's something there.

"Come on," Harry says, holding out his hand.

Hermione stares at it, like she's not sure what to do with it, exactly. She's afraid of all of the goose bumps that will rise up on her arms if she touches his hand.

"Hermione?"

She takes his hand, and he pulls her up. He lets his hand drop and pats her shoulder. A move only a friend would make. Is that all he sees in her? A friend he happened to knock up one night when he was completely wasted?

"Let's just go, Ok?" she says quickly, brushing past him. He feels a tingle where her shoulder brushed his arm. He wants to grab her hand again, but he won't. He can't.

"I'll see you there, right?" he calls after her.

"Do you remember the address?" she calls back.

"Yes."

"Well, this is a *lovely* surprise, dear," Mrs Granger says, patting her daughter's cheek and smiling. "I'll go put the kettle on."

Hermione tries to smile back, but she can't. She's too nervous. What will they say? Will they disown her?

"Nice to see you again, Harry," says Mr Granger, clapping him on the back. "You hear the latest news about the Chudley Cannons?"

Harry looks at Hermione with raised eyebrows. "Dad's gotten into Quidditch," she explains. "He finds it much more interesting than football."

“No – what’s happened? I’m afraid I’ve been so, um, busy – I haven’t been able to keep up with it all.”

“Why, they’ve got Krum on the team now!”

“What?” says Hermione, surprised. “Krum? Viktor Krum?”

“Yes, dear. Isn’t that fantastic? With Ron and Krum on that team, they’ll be unstoppable.”

Harry and Hermione exchange glances, and they both smile a little.

“Yes, I bet Ron is just *thrilled*,” Hermione enthuses.

“Harry, darling, would you like honey in your tea?”

“That would be great, Mrs Granger. Thank you.”

Mr Granger leads Harry and Hermione into the sitting room. He gestures towards the couch, and they sit next to each other, keeping their distance as best they can.

“So,” says Mrs Granger, carrying in a tray with four steaming cups of tea. “Is there any particular reason you two dropped by?”

Hermione swallows, and Harry wipes his sweaty hands on his pants. Mrs Granger hands them each a cup, and carries one over to Mr Granger, setting the tray down next to her and wrapping her small hands around her own cup as she sits down in a chair facing the couch.

“Well – I just – we wanted –” Hermione sighs as she watches both of her parents lift their cups to their faces. There doesn’t seem to be any real point in holding out, when it’s something like this. “Mum, dad, I’m – I’m pregnant.”

Mr Granger spits out his tea, his face turning slightly purple. But Mrs Granger remains completely calm, taking another delicate sip. “I see,” she says. “And – Harry is the father, I’m guessing.”

“Yes,” says Harry quietly.

“And you’re keeping the baby, are you?”

“Yes,” Harry and Hermione say together.

“I just – we thought you should know, that’s all,” Hermione says, clenching her fists until her knuckles turn white. She’s bracing herself.

There’s a pause. Neither of her parents start yelling, and they don’t throw their hot cups of tea at Harry’s head or anything. Mr Granger has regained his composure, and he and Mrs Granger are both staring at Hermione and Hermione. And then, Mrs Granger smiles.

“When are you due?”

“Wha – you’re not mad? You’re not going to punish me or anything?”

“Mad?” Mrs Granger looked astonished at the thought. “Why on earth would we be *mad* at you?”

Um, because their daughter lost her virginity when she was wasted?

Harry looks from Mr Granger and Mrs Granger in disbelief. “But – but we’re not even dating! It just – it sort of just *happened*. We weren’t even really thinking. Aren’t you angry with *me*, even?”

Mr Granger looks at Harry over his glasses. “You’re sitting here in front of me, aren’t you? That’s proof enough for me that you’re accepting the weight of your decisions.”

“So maybe it wasn’t exactly a *great* move,” Mrs Granger says. “I mean, you could have used protection at least – and Hermione, it *was* your first time —”

“Mum,” Hermione protests.

“Well, I’m just saying love – anyway, the point is, you two are keeping the baby, and that’s all that matters. And Hermione, your father and I certainly aren’t going to turn our backs on you for keeping the child.”

Harry and Hermione look at each other.

“So,” says Mrs Granger eagerly. “When are you due?”

Hermione slowly smiles. So maybe she *won't* be locked up in a tower after all. Maybe she and Harry will live to tell this tale. "Erm, May."

"Oh! Wonderful!" Mrs Granger looks at her daughter, concerned. "So have you started feeling dizzy at random moments?"

"Uh, yes."

"And are your breasts ever sore? It's quite typical, really –"

"Mum!"

"Sorry, darling. We'll talk about those kinds of things in private, all right?"

"Congratulations, by the way," says Mr Granger to Harry in a low voice. "And – take care of my daughter for me, will you?"

"I promise, sir."

Mr Granger smiles at him knowingly. Like he can see through Harry. Like he can see how much Harry truly loves his daughter.

"I know you will."

"Do you want me to get you anything?" Harry asks Hermione as he walks into the kitchen. "I'm absolutely *starving*, I didn't eat anything before we went over, I was so bloody nervous, and –" He stops and turns back around.

Hermione has collapsed on the sofa, her face pressed against one of the pillows.

"Hermione! Are you all right?"

He carefully pulls the pillow away from her face. There's a small wet patch on the pillow. Harry sets it down next to the sofa and lifts Hermione, putting her arms around his neck and pulling her into a hug. "It's all right," he says soothingly. "Your parents were wonderful, Hermione. They love you. It's going to be Ok."

Hermione sniffles slightly into Harry's sweater. "I just – I hadn't expected them – they *were* wonderful. My dad – he gets angry when a movie has nudity in it. The last thing I expected was for him to *congratulate* you for getting smashed and having sex with me."

"Well, when you put it that way, it sounds terrible."

"Oh, Harry, I don't mean it that way. I'm just so relieved."

"I know. Me too."

Her sobs are getting softer, and she's realising just how close together they are. And it's a little too close, if they're going to try and keep up this 'just friends' relationship. And so, rather reluctantly, she pulls herself away. "I'm rather hungry, too," she admits. "Some dinner would be wonderful. I can make it."

"Don't be ridiculous. Stay here. I'll make something. Just watch some television or something." Harry wipes her cheeks and tweaks her nose, gets up, and walks back to the kitchen.

Hermione sighs and lets her head fall back against the cushions. This really *is* a nice apartment. It's quite cozy, honestly. And with the added bedroom and bathroom, which Harry had sweetly conjured up to accommodate Hermione, made it feel like the kind of apartment that friends *would* share. The kind of friends who would walk around with towels on and not feel any sexual chemistry. The kind of friends who could bring home girlfriends and boyfriends and night and not feel bitter. The kind of friends who could watch a movie and order in and sit right next to each other on the couch and not see each other in a different light or anything like that.

This apartment isn't fit the situation at all.

This isn't the apartment that friends with a baby on the way would live in.

Actually, now that Hermione thinks about it, this is really more of a bachelor pad, and not a shared apartment. The kind of apartment that some hotshot would bring his latest trophy, and he'd impress her with all of his trophies and kiss her with all this intensity, and then he'd tell

her he'd call her again once he knew he had her, and he'd never make any contact with her ever again. The kind of apartment in which a gang of boys would get together and get smashed and brag about who they've bagged.

This isn't the apartment that friends with a baby on the way would live in.

And Hermione can feel herself getting angrier and angrier with Harry. She can see him, pressing other girls up against that same wall and making them whimper. And she can see him brushing hair out of the face of some other girl, with long blond hair and pale, pale skin, a really thin girl. And another girl with enormous breasts that he just couldn't get enough of. And it makes her sick, just sick to think that she was just another. Another trophy on his wall. Another girl for him to brag about.

But she isn't. She's a mistake. She's a "just another" who happens to be pregnant now. And that makes her feel even worse. And she doesn't know why, exactly, she's so jealous of these girls she's conjured up in her mind, but she is, and she's angry for letting Harry get the best of her.

"Hermione? I just made eggs and toast. I hope that's all right. It just – I don't really know how to make much else, besides spaghetti, and I thought you might need the protein ..." Harry trails off when he sees Hermione. She's glaring up at him, her arms folded across her chest and a frown on her mouth. "Are you all right?"

She sighs and looks away. "I'm *fine*," she huffs. "Did you do this for all of your other girlfriends?"

Harry looks confused. "What are you talking about?"

"Did you make *them* cute little breakfast-in-the-afternoon meals?"

An amused smile plays across his lips for just a second, but it goes away quickly. "Hermione – you know I haven't had any girlfriends, besides Cho and Ginny, and Jane, but you know about all of them. And you *know* Jane only lasted a few dates."

"So you're more of a one-night stand type of boy, is that it? Two nights, in my case," she adds bitterly.

"Hermione, what's going on here? Where did this come from?" Harry looks hurt now, and she feels terrible. "I – I don't really know what this is about, but if I said anything that implied that I'm that kind of person, then I'm sorry. But I thought you knew me better than that." He pauses. "The food's in the kitchen, if you want it. I've lost my appetite." He takes his coat off of the hanger. "I'm going for a walk. I'll be back in a little." He turns around. "How on earth could you get *that* kind of impression of me?" And he walks away, banging the door behind him.

The air is brisk. It feels good against his face, whipping through his hair.

How could she say something like that? Harry seethes as he walks along the streets in Diagon Alley, his hands shoved in his pockets. Something so cruel and uncalled for. And the look in her eyes—why was she angry with him? What had he done? Did he say something?

Harry wants desperately to believe it hasn't affected him. That Hermione's outburst doesn't still sting him. That he doesn't feel anything from that. He's not even sure how he reacted to Hermione's biting comments when they were younger, when things weren't this complicated. He's not sure how "Harry" would react. The Harry who grew up with Hermione, who never saw her as anything more than his best friend, the girl he could talk to about all of his *other* girl issues with. And he valued that, still does, and he's afraid of losing that for this – this awkwardness. He's not sure if he should just act like nothing happened all the time or show his feelings, tell her just how he feels ... and it's terrible this way.

And this is just the first two months, he thinks bitterly. And he hates himself for having such a though, such a terrible thought just two months into this thing he got himself into.

And suddenly, Harry knows where he wants to be.

And with a turn, he's there.

The plot of land is still marked off. No one dares to clean it up. It's almost sacred. It's certainly sacred to Harry.

This is where Voldemort killed his parents.

And this is where he killed Voldemort.

Harry walks over some of the rubble carefully, reaching a small clearing.

This is where he stood.

This is where he watched Voldemort fall.

Harry sits down on a piece of stone. He rubs his forehead and bites his lip. He's not even sure what made him think this was a good idea.

And he just starts to talk.

"Er, hi," he says awkwardly. "Mum, dad. I know you can hear me. At least, I hope you can." He coughs. It's quiet, and it's getting dark, and it's peaceful, so peaceful. "I'm sorry I haven't—haven't come here in a while. I've been busy with work and—well, life, I guess. And I think I was scared to come here. I don't really know why. And I don't why this – this new thing makes me want to come here more." Harry swallows the lump in his throat. "I'm scared, honestly. I'm scared for myself, for her—I don't know what's going to happen. I didn't mean for *this* to happen. Hermione's my best friend, and I—I never even thought about something like this. I never thought I'd see her this way, but I do, and I don't know why. And I'm not sure if it's all just connected to me getting her pregnant, but I can't help but feel like it's more than that. I'm scared of what's going to happen afterwards—will I just see my child on weekends? Will our friendship last something as big as this? Are we—are we meant to be together? Am I in love with my best friend?" Harry laughs and shakes his head. "That can't be it—I never even thought about it until that night. I never even considered it, never toyed with that idea. And yet here it is, sitting right in front of me. And I just—I just don't know what to do with it."

Harry looks up. A few stars are twinkling in the sky. "I wish you could see this," he says softly. "I wish you could be here, to see this sky, to sit with me and just look up and love life. But you're not. I am, and I'm so confused as to where I'm to go from here. Where am I supposed to go? I just don't know anymore."

A few tears are stinging his eyes, and they slide past his temples, his head still tilted upwards. "I wish you were here," he whispers.

Hermione paces around the apartment anxiously. She's called all of their friends ("Don't be so worried, Hermione!" Ron had scolded her. "He said he was going for a walk, so I'm betting he's walking!"). She's completely forgotten about the food. And now, she's walking around and around in circles, waiting for him to get home.

She goes into his room. It feels wrong, in a way. Invading his privacy when he's not even home.

She would never have cared about this before. Why does she now?

His dresser has a few pictures on it, some in frames, and a few, obviously taken with a Muggle camera, lying in a pile at the edge of the dresser. She picks up one of the moving pictures in a plain glass frame, studying it.

It was a picture of the three of them, but Harry's missing from the picture, and Hermione just looks worried. Ron's laughing, though, like he was when the picture was taken. From Bill's wedding. They had just been dancing, and they were sweating and their hair was plastered to their faces. And Hermione had taken off her shoes and was dancing in her bare feet, and Ron and Harry had loosened their ties. And Hermione had demanded they play some Muggle classics that she and Harry sang along to. And Ron had shoved Harry's face into his piece of cake. And Harry and Ginny had kissed and she and Ron had kissed and things, for once, were entirely uncomplicated. And it was wonderful. And they had been happy.

Hermione feels goose bumps rising on her arms, just thinking about what happened next. Standing in Godric's Hollow, crying incantations at the Death Eaters surrounding her. Seeing Ron fall and shouting out a spell for a protection shield that surrounded him. And watching Harry, in the rubble of his parents' house, screaming spells at Voldemort, ducking behind the few bits of stonewall that still stood as Voldemort screamed back at him. And Voldemort's cackle as he cried, "Do not hide from me, boy! Not this time!" And Harry had stood up, raised his wand, and screamed the words, which had seemed so muffled to her, and there was a flash of green light and Voldemort was gone ... gone.

She's crying now. Remembering holding Harry and Ron and just breathing as one. Friends to the very end. And now? Can a friendship endure something like this?

The door slams shut, and Hermione runs back to the main room, still clutching the picture. "You're back," she says.

"I'm back," he repeats, turning his back to her to hang his coat. And when he turns back, she's just standing there. Watching him. "What? Do you have any more snide remarks?" Hermione shakes her head. The words are on the tip of her tongue. "I'm – I'm – I'm –" She stops. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean what I said, and I don't – I don't even know *why* I said those things. It just came out. I'm sorry."

She looks up, holds his stare for one, two, three seconds before looking away. "I'm sorry," she repeats quietly.

Why won't she look at him? What is she so afraid of?

He finally says, "It's Ok." That's it. He doesn't raise his voice or anything. He doesn't get angry with her.

She can't help but feel like it would be more normal for him to kick and scream. Tell her she was being so ridiculously stupid. But then again, she's not sure if that's even what her *friend* Harry would do. Yes, he has his outbursts, but not often—not nearly as often as Ron does, that's for sure. But not many things get him angry. Is this something the *friend* Harry wouldn't get mad about, or something the Harry-who-feels-awkward-because-he-had-sex-with-her wouldn't get angry about? She doesn't know. She just doesn't know.

"What are you holding?" he asks her, gently pulling the picture from her grasp. He studies it. She looks at it upside-down. They're all back in the picture, back to smiling. But Hermione's brow is still furrowed, even with a grin plastered on her face.

"I could – heat up the food," Hermione offers.

Harry lifts his eyes. "You mean you didn't eat it?"

The tone of his voice surprises her.

"No—it's no big deal! I wasn't hungry after you left."

"*Hermione*," Harry groans. "You have to eat something—you can't just *not* eat for a whole day –"

“Harry, it’s fine! Don’t worry! I promise the baby’s not going to get sick. I had a few cookies at my parents’ house.” She pauses. “Look, if you’re so upset, I’ll go eat right now. Ok?”

Harry nods, and Hermione smiles. It’s actually quite sweet, really, how concerned he is.

Harry looks at her. He could reach out, touch her face, pull her to him and kiss her. He could tell her about all of these new emotions he has when he looks at her. How much he needs her. She’s absolutely beautiful right now, and all she’s doing is standing in front of him with her arms folded across her chest.

He could tell her.

He could, but he won’t.

She’s just one step too far away.

She’s his best friend.

Nothing more, nothing less.

The sun streams through the window, and for some reason, this reminds Hermione of cold buttered popcorn, and before she knows what's really happening, she's thrown up last night's chicken alfredo all over the wooden floor of her bedroom. Clamping her hand over her mouth, Hermione stumbles across her room to the bathroom. She clutches the white porcelain rim of the toilet as she heaves into it. Tears are in the corners of her eyes and she's sweating with the effort.

“Hermione!”

She feels her hair being pulled back, and she coughs and splutters, breathing heavily.

When it's over, she wipes her mouth. Harry's still holding her hair back. She leans her head against his knees. “Sorry,” she mumbles.

Harry kneels beside her, letting her ringlets and curls slide from his hands onto her shoulders. “Are you all right?” he asks sleepily. Now that he knows she's all right, he's back to being tired again.

“I think so,” she says slowly.

“Morning sickness,” Harry says knowledgeably.

“Excuse me?”

“Morning sickness,” Harry repeats. “It actually happens at any time of the day, really ... anyway, you need to change a few things about your eating habits—we should probably buy some protein bars and things like that for you to eat before you go to bed. Oh, and if you get up in the middle of the night to go the bathroom, you need to eat a small snack. And don't drink your water and stuff when you're eating, but after. And -”

“Harry, how do you know all this stuff?” Hermione asks incredulously.

Harry stops and looks away, blushing slightly. He mumbles something.

“What?”

He clears his throat. "I bought a book."

"You bought a *book*?" Hermione repeats, smiling.

Harry nods, sees the look in her face, and says defensively, "Look, I never had anyone *tell* me anything about this—I didn't even know what being *late* meant, so I thought I should do some reading so that I'd be a bit more—prepared, and besides —"

Hermione stops him, pressing a finger to his mouth. "I wasn't saying it was stupid. I think it's actually really sweet of you."

Harry's blush deepens. "Can I make you anything for breakfast? I mean, I know you just threw up everything you ate last night, but ... it would be good for you to get something into your stomach before you go to work."

Hermione smiles and nods. "I think I'm going to take a shower. All right? I'll be out in a minute."

Harry stands and takes her hand, helping her to her feet. "You're sure you're all right?" he asks again, concerned.

Hermione nods. "Nothing a shower can't cure," she says.

Harry feels himself tighten, and he hurries out before she can notice anything. Because he's just gotten a very graphic image of Hermione taking a shower, and ... well, it has definitely excited him quite a bit. *What kind of sick freak am I?* he wonders angrily. Thinking about his best friend, naked. How could that kind of thing come to mind?

Um, maybe because he's already seen her naked?

The doorbell rings that evening. Hermione swallows and looks back at Harry. "Are you ready?" she asks nervously.

He nods slowly.

Hermione opens the door. "Ron," she says as graciously as she can. "Thanks for coming."

Ron pulls her into a hug, planting a kiss on her cheek. Harry watches, slightly jealous, and he clenches his fists involuntary. He can't even touch Hermione anymore without feeling electricity coursing through his body. He avoids it when he can, and at the same time, he looks for opportunities to brush his arm against her shoulder, accidentally touch her hand as they reach for teacups, *anything* to make a connection. Anything at all. But he can't flat out hug her like Ron is right now. He just can't handle it.

And why is he jealous, anyway? It's Ron. Yes, he and Hermione *had* something, but it had ended—much faster than it started, that was for sure. Ron hugging Hermione right now is nothing more than a friend thing.

They part, and Hermione smiles up at Ron. She touches his cheek. "Nice sideburns," she says.

Ron grins. "Thanks." He walks up to Harry, and they hug quickly. Hermione watches them, her hands in fists at her sides. What will Ron think about all of this? His ex-girlfriend, now pregnant with his best friend's child. How could he possibly feel Ok with all of this?

"Can I get you anything?"

"Get me whatever it is that you have that's strong," Ron replies.

Harry gulps, suddenly realizing something.

"Oh," says Hermione slowly, turning pink. "We, um -"

"Actually, we haven't been out to, erm, buy much lately—sorry," Harry says. "You know how it gets, with work and all that, yeah?"

Ron looks at Harry like he's grown another head. "What, you mean to tell me you're completely out?"

Harry nods, looking away.

"What the bloody hell is wrong with you two?"

“Ron,” gasps Hermione. “We just haven’t been out to get anything lately. How about some water?”

“Water,” Ron repeats, shaking his head. “Water.”

Hermione coughs. “Well, I’ll just get that then, shall I? And I’ll get the rest of the dinner ready.” She hurries out of the living room, leaving them alone.

Harry rubs the back of his neck. When they tell him, will Ron lunge at his throat? Should he be prepared to defend himself when they drop the bomb?

Ron walks up to Harry, and lifts his hand, whacking the back of Harry’s head with his palm. “Oi!” Harry protests. “That *hurt* you wally!”

“No alcohol,” Ron says in a whisper. “No alcohol whatsoever? Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“Positive?”

“Yes,’ Harry says angrily.

Ron pauses.

“Is it because you’re an alkie?”
“What?”

“Do you not have anything in this house because you’re a bloody alcoholic?”

“What—no! That’s not it at all! Look, if you want a drink so badly, go get some, alright?”

Ron shakes his head. “Too much trouble,” he sniffs. “I don’t really—I don’t *really* need it, I guess.” He sits down on the couch. Harry sits down next to him, using his wand to flick on the TV.

“So, how’s the team? You guys doing all right?”

“S’pose,” Ron says glumly. “Krum’s on the team now—don’t know *why* they got him, he’s not worth *anything* at this point—and we have a match in a few weeks.”

“Oh, yeah? I’ll try to make it if I can.”

Ron nods. “I reckon it’ll be a good one.”

Harry leans his head back. This is how it should be. Just friends, sitting in front of the TV, talking. No complications, no worrying about morning sickness and Hermione’s moodiness.

And he hates himself for thinking negatively. Because he knows he’s doing it to downplay how much he secretly loves it. Not that he loves her feeling sick and throwing up—it’s honestly hard to watch—but the taking care of her idea. Of protecting her. Of knowing that she needs him.

But the scary think about knowing that she needs him is knowing that he needs her, too.

“What do you think, Harry? Harry”

He blinks. Ron’s staring at him. “What is *wrong* with you, mate? You look ... you look plain goofy right now.”

“It’s nothing,” Harry says quickly. “Just tired—busy with work, you know.”

“It’s ready!” Hermione calls from the kitchen.

Harry mutters a charm and the TV turns off. He refuses to meet Ron’s eye as he walks into the kitchen. Hermione’s bending over, pulling lamb out of the oven. A small amount of her back is exposed, her shirt riding up, and Harry feels tingles all over. And he feels terrible for finding pleasure looking at her when she doesn’t know he’s looking at her, but he just can’t help it.

She stands up and looks over her shoulder. And she catches him staring at her. And she smiles.

"You two can sit down, and I'll just serve you," she says, and then laughs. "I feel like a maid or something."

Ron and Harry both laugh, and it feels normal. This is what it should be like.

But is there really a 'should be' in this kind of situation?

The beginning of the meal is normal. Comfortable. Ron tells jokes, Harry flicks food at him, Hermione reprimands them both. No thoughts on Voldemort, or pregnancy or work. Just laughter.

"So, what's new with you two?" Ron says after they have eaten, belching loudly and leaning back in his chair. "How is this set-up working out? I'm still offended you didn't invite me to join," he adds, grinning.

Harry and Hermione look at each other. How *is* it working out? Is this the time for them to tell him the truth? Or should they hold off, wait just a little longer?

No. They are friends. And friends don't keep secrets from each other.

Hermione turns to Ron, setting down her glass carefully on the table. She's craving nachos with chocolate sauce right now and she doesn't know why. "Ron, look, the reason we're living like this is—well, you remember your birthday? Well, Harry and I stayed at the club for a while, and—well, got positively smashed, and we ended up kissing and then—" She breaks off and looks at Harry. Underneath the table, he reaches for her hand, and squeezes it.

It's the first real move of that kind he's made. And yet all that's there is hope. They're just two scared people, and they're not sure what's going to come next, and all they can do is what feels right. And telling Ron feels right.

"And then we had sex," Harry says, looking straight at Ron. No lies.

Ron, who is taking a sip of his water, spits it out, spewing it across the table. "What?" he yelps.

“Ron -”

“You had sex?”

“Yes, but Ron, that’s not all -” Hermione sighs. “Ron, I’m pregnant.”

Ron gulps. “Bloody hell,” he says, shaking his head.

“Look, Ron, it was just a mistake, but we don’t want to give the baby away—and we decided that it would make sense if Hermione moved in with me so that I could take care of her—but it’s not like we’re—together or anything like that. Honest. It just happened.” Harry swallows hard and looks at Hermione. Tears are in her eyes, and she’s looking at Ron, but he’s not looking at her.

“So this happened—what, three months ago?”

“Yes,” Hermione breathes.

“And so you’re due in six?”

“Yes.”

There’s a pause.

“Bloody hell,” Ron repeats.

“We’re so sorry for not telling you sooner,” Hermione says. “We just—we needed to get a few other things figured out first. And—oh, Ron, we didn’t mean to hurt you. I didn’t mean to hurt you. I would never want you to think that.” She lowers her head. “I’m sorry.”

There’s just silence. Nothing else. Harry’s just looking at Ron, and then Hermione. Back and forth. Waiting for someone to say something. Anything.

Ron clears his throat, and Hermione jerks her head up. Her hand is still in Harry’s, and she squeezes it just a little. Just enough.

Harry and Hermione look at Ron, and he looks back at them.

And then, suddenly, Ron just starts laughing. His face is turning bright red, and he’s laughing, and gasping for air, and laughing more.

“What’s so funny?” Harry asks, completely confused.

Ron’s giggles die down, and he shakes his head, looking at them knowingly. “Oh—never mind. You’ll figure it out eventually,” he finally says, wiping the tears off his cheeks.

“So—so you’re not mad?” Hermione breathes.

“Mad? Well, maybe a little hurt,” Ron admits. “I wish you had told me sooner. But—I mean, yes, it’s not exactly the most wonderful situation—I mean, of all the people you could have chosen next, Hermione -”

“Ron,” she says firmly.

“All right, all right,” he says quickly. “The point is—I’m not going anywhere.” He looks a little sad for a moment. Harry catches it. And he realises just how difficult this must be for Ron. His ex-girlfriend, the girl he was in love with from the moment she walked into that train compartment, the girl he didn’t realise he was in love with until several years later, the girl who could drive him crazy and made him kick and scream, the girl who was always there no matter what ... that girl was not his anymore. And Harry feels so grateful to have Ron. Ron, who could hold grudges with the best of them, is giving them his blessing.

There’s a lump in Harry’s throat. He hadn’t expected this to move him to tears, nor to realise how lucky he is to have Ron. The one who stood by his side no matter what happened. The one who screamed incantations in Godric’s Hollow that fateful night.

The one who will be there when Harry’s baby comes.

Ron kisses Hermione’s forehead lightly. And, even though Harry feels something inside of him burning, he knows it’s nothing. And somehow, all of this is Ok.

Hermione leaves to let the two boys say their goodbyes.

Ron turns to Harry with a gleam in his eye and shoves his friend slightly.

“What was that for?” Harry asks, rubbing his chest.

“She’s the girl, isn’t she?”
“What are you talking about?”

“Remember? When I came to your apartment the day after my birthday? I knew you had gotten some the night before! It was Hermione, wasn’t it?”

“Ron -” Harry braces himself. He knows what’s coming next.

“You’re in love with her, aren’t you?”

But it wasn’t angry, like Harry anticipated. It was just a question. He looks up. Ron is staring at him, not with hatred, but with curiosity. And they just look at each other.

“I don’t know,” manages Harry after a long pause.

Ron pulls on his cloak. He hugs Harry, and when he opens the door, he turns around. “I do,” he says, smiling.

It's hot.

No, it's boiling.

Hermione kicks back the sheets and fans her face. Why is she so hot? She doesn't even know why.

And she's starving.

She creeps out of her room quietly. The light in Harry's room is off. She sighs. She should apologise at some point. She snapped at him during dinner, and she doesn't even know why. All he was doing was telling her that she—how had he put it? That she looked beautiful. That her skin was positively glowing. And she had told him not to try and make her feel better, that she knew she was starting to look like a house, and he had kept insisting, quite stubbornly, actually, that she was beautiful. And she had told him he was lying, and he had stopped even trying to talk, and he had flicked his wand at his plate, sending it over to the sink, and they had watched it clean itself in complete silence. And he had stood up, given her one last look—it hadn't been angry, even, just frustrated—and he had locked himself in his room.

She walks into the kitchen, and pulls out crackers and cheese. *Protein*, Harry's voice says in her head. *I'm getting my bloody protein*, she responds irritably. *This cheese has loads. Bugger off*. She sighs and eats a cracker, watching the crumbs spill across the plate.

She hears noise coming from his room, and pads quickly down the hallway. Opening his door, she finds him lying on the bed, the blankets balled up in his fists, and he's moaning, "No, please no -"

"Harry?" she whispers tentatively, walking forward. "Harry, are you all right?"

He doesn't respond, but continues to toss and turn. She reaches out and touches his hand gently, and he grabs her wrist impulsively, his eyes widening. She lets out a little gasp and tries to pull her hand away, but he grips her wrist tighter.

"Hermione?" he whispers, pulling her body closer to identify her face.

“What’s wrong?” she asks even more quietly. Her face is so close to him she could kiss him. She could, but she won’t. She can’t really. But she wants to. God how she wants to. “What happened?”

He shakes his head, and she reaches out slowly, pushing some of the sweaty hair out of his face. “I had a nightmare,” he says, breathing deeply. “It was about—about the baby.” He pauses. “And you.”

“What happened?” Hermione asks, sitting down. She feels slightly nervous, sitting here. The last time she was actually on this bed, she had been kissing him, hard and long and without any hesitation. Now, she’s just having difficulty sitting so close to him and remembering to breathe.

“The baby was—it was beautiful. And I was holding it in my hands, and you were looking up at it, too. And then —” Harry swallows. “Voldemort just appeared, and he snatched the baby from me, and you were screaming, and I ran at him, and he – he killed the baby.” Harry looks away. “And then he killed you.”

Hermione shivers, putting her hand to her mouth, and Harry looks back at her. He looks scared, more scared than she’s ever seen him. He never looked like this at Godric’s Hollow. All that had been in his eyes then was hatred—hated for the man—no, the thing—that took his mother and father away. Not once did she see in his eyes the fear that filled them now.

Hermione reaches for his hand, and slowly, carefully, puts it to her stomach. She breathes in, breathes out. And he breathes with her. And somewhere inside of her, their child is breathing.

Hermione doesn’t say anything, and neither does Harry. They don’t have to. They just understand.

After a few minutes, Hermione pulls away slightly. “I should probably get back to bed,” she says. “If you need me—tell me, all right?” She starts to get up, but he grabs her hand again, looking up at her.

“Please,” he says quietly. “Can you just stay here tonight? Please?”

Hermione looks at him slowly, distrustfully. But all there is in his eyes is fear. Fear of losing her.

She slides next to him in the bed. He lies back down on the complete opposite side, and takes her hand. And he just holds it tightly in his own, and she squeezes back, until his breathing steadies and she knows he's asleep.

She rolls over onto her side, still holding his hand, just looking at him. His brow is furrowed, like it always is when he's thinking. How can he possibly be thinking while he's sleeping? And what is he thinking about? Her?

She moves onto her back again. Her hand feels safe in his, and she doesn't want to let go. Ever.

She's in love with him.

What?

"No," she says quietly into the darkness that surrounds them.

There is no way. Maybe there's—something there, but it can't possibly be anything more than—well, they've known each other for so long, so it's probably just some sort of typical situation, where you start loving your best friend—and besides, just because she's lying here next to him, holding his hand—that shouldn't mean anything to her, right?

She's in love with him.

No. That's not possible. It can't be.

Can it?

No. There's no way.

I'm in love with him.

And all of the feelings she's been holding at bay overflow, and she starts to cry, very quietly. The tears stream backwards, across her

temples, into her ears, her hair. She looks over at Harry, with his furrowed brow, and she wants to kiss him. And

she doesn't know why. She doesn't understand why she feels like this. Why she thinks about him so often. Why she doesn't feel like she can say anything right anymore. Why she feels her heart melt every time he spouts off facts about pregnancy. Why she doesn't want him to leave for work in the morning. Why she's so glad when he comes back. She doesn't understand why she cares so much now. Why she has all of the feelings she had for him before, but now she has more feelings, different feelings, tangled up with all of the emotions from before, and her heart just can't handle it. She's stuck between loving him the way she always has and loving him in this new way, and it's just too much, and she doesn't really know what she can do—or if there is anything she can do.

Can she just tell herself to stop, before this gets too hard? Can she command herself to stop looking at him the way she does now? Can she make all of this go away?

Hermione studies his face, still sniffling slightly. A single tear slides down his cheek, and she wants to know why he's crying. She wants to fix his problems, wants to tell him that everything is Ok. She wants to tell him she loves him. She wants him kiss her forehead before she goes to bed. To buy her flowers and send her cute messages via Hedwig and ... and she wants him to love her, too.

She must stop this. Before it goes to far. She has to close off that section of her mind, right away. Before anything else happens. Before she ruins everything she has had with this boy, over some stupid little crush. Because that's all this is, isn't it? A crush. He was drunk. It was a mistake. None of this was supposed to happen.

But now that she's here ... how can she want it any other way?

When he wakes up, he feels something heavy on his chest. And when he opens his eyes, there is a tangle of curly hair near his face, and someone is breathing lightly onto his skin, and there is a hand in his.

And he knows who it belongs to.

He breathes in her scent. A combination of spices and flowers and ... something else. Something he can't quite put his finger on. A smell he can't quite describe but has been a part of Hermione since before he could remember. Since the very beginning, this smell has been her trademark. And he can't explain it. But he wants to know what it is. How she can always smell so positively wonderful.

They're breathing at the same pace, and Harry sighs a little, looking out the window. It's still dark out. It's four in the morning. The darkness is beautiful. And the girl holding his hand is beautiful.

And the last time he told her that, she bit his head off.

But she is. He can't pretend he doesn't see it. He can't pretend that seeing her doesn't affect him in a way he never felt before. It's indescribable, wonderful, bizarre, ridiculous ... amazing. Just by looking at her, he feels so many different emotions, and he never knew they could all be felt all at the same time. And it's crushing him, really. Because he knows when she looks at him, all she sees is Harry. Even with his baby inside of her, all she sees is her best friend. Even the way she handles this situation—living in the same apartment, eating dinner together—she treats it as if it's nothing to her. As if it's just nine months she has to get through and then she can go. And things can go back to normal.

But can they? Now that he feels all these things, can he really allow everything to go back to the way it was? What was it like before, anyway? He doesn't even remember how he and Hermione interacted when there was nothing. Was there always a chemistry that was there? Was it better when neither of them knew it existed? What if he's always had these feelings? Why did they all come out now?

Harry shakes his head and closes his eyes. He doesn't want to believe things will go back to normal. He wants to believe that this moment is real. That she loves him as much as he loves her.

The sun creeps into the room, reflecting off the photographs on Harry's dresser, slowly spreading across Harry's bed.

Hermione stirs, and so does Harry. And they open their eyes at the same time, to find themselves looking straight at each other.

They could pull away. They were just sleeping, right? Harry's arm around her waist, Hermione's hand on his chest, their free hands still clasped together—it just happened. They could break apart.

But they don't. If anything, Harry's grip *tightens*.

And they just lie there for a few seconds. Just a few more seconds of this fantasy before they sink back into reality. They're friends. That is all they can be.

Right?

"Hey," Harry says quietly, smiling slightly.

Hermione smiles back. "Hey," she repeats, looking straight into his eyes. Those big green eyes. Can he read her mind? Can he feel how fast her heart is beating?

"I'm sorry if I worried you last night," says Harry slowly. "I didn't mean to. It was just a stupid dream -"

"It wasn't stupid," Hermione cuts him off. "Don't ever say that. It wasn't stupid."

They don't say anything for a while.

Harry's clock goes off, and they jump apart in surprise. The moment is gone. Whatever was there is gone. They are just Harry and Hermione—nothing more, nothing less.

Harry turns away from her to switch the clock off. He wishes he could just turn around, kiss her and tell her how much she means to him. He wishes she would tell him she feels the same way.

Hermione studies his back. She wants to believe there's something there.

But she knows there isn't. There can't be. He would never, ever look at her like that. And she can feel tears coming to her eyes, and she

can't let him see. So she gets up off the bed slowly, walking out of the door.

Harry turns back, watching her go. Her hair trailing down her back. Her skin is glowing. She's beautiful. "Hermione?" he hears himself calling after her.

She stops in his doorway.

"Yes?"

He pauses. The words are at the tip of his tongue: I love you, Hermione. He could say it right now, make his declaration.

He could, but he won't.

"Thanks," he finally says.

Hermione looks over her shoulder. And she smiles. And her eyes are glistening slightly, and he doesn't know why. He doesn't know what he did, what happened.

"Harry?"

"Yes?"

She could tell him. Open her mouth and let it all come out. She could say it.

She could, but she won't.

"You're welcome."

And then she's gone.

When she reaches her room, she closes the door, pressing her forehead against it and sobbing silently.

It shouldn't hurt this much.

Why does he mean so much in so many different ways right now? Why can't it just stay the same, uncomplicated?

There is just one thin wall between them. Harry's lying on his bed still, his face buried in the spot her body was just moments ago. Her warmth is still there, her scent filling him. Consuming him. How much more can he take?

Hermione slides down to the floor, her face in her hands.

Can they make it through this? Will their friendship last something as big as this?

His child. Her child. Their child. Breathing in, breathing out.

He grips the sheets in his hands.

His child. Her child.

She puts her hand to her stomach.

Their child.

And they breathe in.

And they breathe out.

Harry pays for the Walkers' Crisps and jelly babies and whole milk. Hermione had been craving all morning, rubbing his eyes. The bloody harsh light of the store *hurts*. Ridiculous. No wonder people are always in such a hurry to get out of grocery stores. They're so bright, so artificially bright.

He feels like a housewife.

She doesn't want chocolate frogs or pumpkin pasties.

Just Muggle food.

So Harry decided to go out and buy her that bloody Muggle food. Anything to keep her happy.

He passes a young wife and her baby. She's cooing, and the baby is giggling. He looks over his shoulder to keep watching them. Ever since all of this started, it's like he has a homing device. He can hear a baby crying from a mile away. He's got baby senses or something.

It's kind of cool, actually.

He hums a song as he continues walking. He's never seen *Les Misérables*, but Hermione has been playing the soundtrack for the past week, singing along as she makes dinner, as she works on reports for the Ministry, while she reads the newspaper ... and now, the songs are stuck in *his* head. A sweet reminder. A painful reminder.

He can't have her.

He turns the corner down an alley, turning, Apparating. And he's in the apartment.

He enters the kitchen and stands in the door. She's sitting with her back to him, the *Daily Prophet* lying in front of her on the kitchen table. And he just studies her. He loves the way her hair flows down her back. It's been growing fast; it's almost to her elbows. It's beautiful.

She senses his presence, and she turns her body around in the chair.

Harry holds up the bag triumphantly. "As requested, one bag of Jelly Babies, one bottle of whole milk, and five packets of Walkers' Crisps."

"Prawn-flavoured?"

"Of course."

"You're wonderful."

She hadn't meant to say that.

She had meant just a simple 'thanks'.

Before any of this had happened, she wouldn't have cared what she said to Harry, whether it was 'thank you, you're an angel' or 'oh, you're wonderful'. But now ... she puts up her guard the minute she lets a comment like that slip.

He's wonderful.

She just can't help it. She's been blurting out things like that for the past week, coming so close to just spitting it all out. Close, but she's never said it, thank goodness.

Where would they be if she did?

Hermione lifts her eyes to his, surprised at how close he is. Not too close, but close enough for her to breathe him in. Close enough for her to feel the power of his intent stare. He's just looking down at her. She needs some answers, but all she's getting from his eyes are his own questions. And they're asking the same things, but they don't realise it.

He needs to get away from her smell, that wonderful smell that makes him want to pick her up and spin her around and kiss her lips over and over again and scream out those words. He is so dangerously close to telling her everything, and he can't do that. He can't let that happen.

The doorbell rings.

“I have to go,” he says softly, and then clears his throat. “I have to go,” he repeats. “Ron and I are going to have lunch.”

Hermione nods, blinking a few times.

“I’ll be back in a little, all right?”

The doorbell rings again, and there’s a pounding noise.

Harry moves quickly to answer it, looking over his shoulder once. “I’m going to take a shower,” she says, refusing to look up at him, even though she can feel his eyes on her. Her vision is blurring, and she doesn’t even know why she’s crying. But she can’t let him see it.

Why is this so hard?

Harry watches her leave the kitchen.

She doesn’t look back at him.

She doesn’t care.

She only wants him here because he buys her crisps and milk.

She doesn’t care about him.

He opens the door and walks out, shutting the door behind him. Ron looks at him with a slightly bemused smile on his face. “What, so I’m not even allowed to say hello to Hermione anymore? Are you really that protective?”

Harry shoves his hands into the pockets of his overcoat. “She’s taking a shower. Let’s get a move on, all right?”

“Why are you wearing Muggle clothing?”

Harry sighs. “Long story. Well, not really, but I don’t feel like explaining it.”

Ron shrugs. “Well, I’m starving. Shall we?”

They Apparate into Diagon Alley and begin to stroll down the street.

“How’s the team?” Harry asks as the cold wind swirls around them.
“ ‘s all right,” Ron answers. “Viktor’s actually quite good.”

“And you didn’t know that before?”

“Well, I just mean—he kind of went off for a little while there—he’s improved quite a bit.”

“Are you still holding a grudge?”
“What—you mean about Hermione? Nah. He’s quite nice, really.”
Ron pauses. “He *has* asked about her a lot.”

“Oh?” Harry clenches his fists involuntarily.

“Yeah. Always wants to know how she is.” Ron pauses. “I think he’s still in love with her.” Ron catches the look on Harry’s face and laughs.
“Who’s the jealous one now?”

“What are you talking about?” says Harry, trying desperately to recover.

“Oh, good lord, you still haven’t told her? What the bloody hell is going on with you two? Are you that blind?”

“What?”

“You’re in love with her!” Ron yells gleefully, causing many witches and wizards to turn their heads.

“Ron -”

“You do! I can see it! You can deny it all you want, Harry, but I know it’s true. I’m your best mate, all righ’? I know. You can admit it.”

“Ron -”

“You need to tell her. You know that, don’t you? You can’t just hide it from her.”

“Ron -”

“And with everything that’s going on—the sooner the better.”

“I’m. Not. In. Love. With. Her.” Harry says each word slowly and carefully.

There’s silence for a few moments.

“You’re protesting a bit too much you know.”

Harry sighs heavily, rolling his eyes. “You’re impossible, Ron.”

“Maybe. But I’m also right.”

They turn into the small restaurant, and Ron finally turns the subject back to Quidditch. That’s more or less all they talk about throughout the meal. But Harry’s mind is still processing what Ron has said.

Should he tell her?

No, that would be stupid. She doesn’t feel the same way. What if he tells her, and she laughs at him? Or screams at him?

But what if she feels the same way?

Harry shakes his head.

She will never feel the same way.

“Harry? Did you hear me?”

He blinks. Ron is holding a yellowing envelope out to him.

“What is this?” Harry asks, taking it.

Ron hesitates. “My mum found it in—in Grimmauld Place.”

Harry’s jaw tightens.

“It’s from Sirius.”

A lump forms in his throat.
“She—she thinks he had been planning to send it and—never gotten around to it.”

Harry looks down at the envelope.

His name is written in Sirius's cramped handwriting. There's a scribble next to it, and Harry peers closer.

Jam it says.

James.

Ron coughs. "I, uh, I need to get going. Mum wanted me to come over as soon as I was done with lunch. Fred, George and I are helping her with gardening or something." He rolls his eyes and stands up. "Harry, are you all right?"

"Yeah," Harry says automatically, his eyes still fixed on the letter.

James.

Harry.

"I'll see you later then, all right?"

"Yeah," Harry says again. He doesn't look up.

Ron claps his shoulder, taking the bill in his other hand. And then he walks away.

Hermione is baking cookies.

She doesn't really know why she's doing it. She just got hungry for chocolate chip cookies.

And here she is.

Her damp hair keeps dripping onto her shirt, but she's too determined to finish these cookies to care.

The door slams. Hermione's heart beats a little faster, and she forces herself to stay in the kitchen, with her back to the door.

She can hear his footsteps.

She hears a chair being pulled out.

She hears him sit down slowly.

Then, she turns around, smiling a little. Her smile fades quickly when she sees his face.

“Harry, what’s wrong?”

She notices the piece of parchment paper clutched in his hand, and she walks towards him, reaching for it. He allows her to take it, and runs his hands through his hair, something she’s noticed he does a lot when he’s nervous.

Hermione touches his shoulder and begins to read to herself.

Harry,

I don’t think this letter is going to make any sense. I don’t even know why I’m writing it. Honestly, there is no real point to it. I just wanted to let you know that I’m proud of you. You’re braver than anyone I’ve ever met—including your father. He would as proud of you as I am. They both would be.

I know I’ve been slightly inconsistent, and I’m sorry. I don’t mean to be so selfish, to attempt to live vicariously through you. You remind me so much of your father—sometimes, I think I forget that you’re different people, and I think I forget that this is a different time than that.

You are a wonderful boy, Harry, and I don’t mean to be constantly comparing you to James. Like I just did. You have so many gifts and talents your father never possessed. You are unique and wonderful, and you are strong.

This letter is of no real importance. I don’t know what’s come over me. I just hope that you understand how much you mean to me.

Sirius.

Hermione She looks at the date of the letter. Oh, that was—she feels tears coming to her eyes.

The day before he died.

The day before Sirius was taken from Harry.

“Would you like a cookie?”

Hermione can’t believe that she actually asked that. Of all the things to say at a time like this!—but Harry is nodding slowly. She goes over to the wire rack, picking up the biggest cookie and handing it to Harry.

He chews it slowly. It’s warm and soft and sweet. And then—he tastes something salty. He’s not sure what it is. His vision blurs. He doesn’t even realise he’s crying until Hermione has dropped down to her knees next to him and he’s buried his face in her neck, into her damp hair, breathing in her scent as he sobs. She doesn’t say anything to him, just holds him tightly, breathing in, breathing out.

And he cries.

He cries for all the things he never got to say to Sirius.

For all the things he lost that night when he was just one year old.

For all the things he lost that night fourteen years later.

“I miss him,” he whispers. “I miss *them*.”

Hermione lets go of him slightly, pressing her forehead to his. Tears are streaming down her face. “They loved you,” she says forcefully. “You know that, don’t you? They still do. Tell me you know that.”

Harry nods slowly. “I know,” he says quietly.

They stare into each other’s eyes. Maybe for just a second, or a minute, or maybe an eternity. Just staring. Just breathing. Just holding on.

The timer goes off, and Hermione stands up, turning towards the oven, but Harry takes her hand. She looks back at him, and as she

does, she feels a fluttering in her stomach, like butterflies. The baby. She touches her stomach.

And Harry reaches out and covers her hand with his.

He looks up at her and smiles a little. And she smiles back. And they both stare at her stomach in wonderment.

This is their child.

I'm in love with you.

How she wants to say it. How she wants to tell him that this baby—this baby is his, and its hers, and its theirs, and that she doesn't want to leave when all of this is over. She wants to fall asleep to the sound of their baby breathing in, breathing out, her head on Harry's chest and her hand in his.

Harry watches his hand move up and down on her stomach, matching her breathing.

I want to marry you.

He blinks, pulling his hand away suddenly. He stands. "I have to—I forgot to send a letter," he says randomly. "I'll, uh, I'll be in my room."

He moves away from her quickly.

I want to marry her.

That's not possible.

He's not allowed to even think that.

It's not true.

He's trying desperately to deny it, but it's already seeped into his mind, and he can't get it out of his head.

I'm in love with her.

I want to marry her.

He closes his door and collapses into the seat by his desk.

How could he have let this happen?

He rubs his forehead angrily.

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

Having a crush on her? That was manageable. He had difficulty breathing around her, yes, but he could deal with it.

Loving her enough to want to marry her? When did he reach that point? Where? How?

He never felt so strongly about any girl before. None compared to this.

“What can I do?” he asks himself aloud.

I'm in love with her.

I want to marry her.

“I can't,” Harry says quietly, resting his head on his desk. “I can't, I can't, I can't, I can't.”

She's not his to have.

That night, Harry sat in front of the television, flipping through the channels.

He hadn't been able to talk coherently at all since his revelation.

His fork had talked for him, scraping across his plate as he ate.

He had felt Hermione's eyes on him. She was confused, he knew, by his sudden repulsion. She didn't understand why he had left so suddenly.

There is absolutely nothing good on the bloody television tonight.

He needs something, anything, to take his mind off her. But he wants something that will also keep him entertained, and none of this is very exciting.

“Harry? Do you mind if I watch with you?”

He looks up quickly. Hermione is standing in the doorway, an extremely large T-shirt on—*Les Misérables*, of course—and plaid pants. Her hair is in a ponytail.

She's beautiful.

Harry moves over on the couch, and Hermione sits down a few inches from him. She studies him. How determinedly he keeps his eyes fixed on the television. He won't even meet her eyes. Why not? What has she said to make him feel the need to ignore her? Something must have happened while he had his hand on her stomach. Maybe he realised just how much responsibility he would have, and he was angry. Is he *angry* with Hermione? Does he blame her for all of this?

Just thinking that he might possibly be thinking *that* makes her angry.

She may be the one with a baby inside her belly, the one who will give birth to the child, but this is not all her.

How dare he blame her!

Hermione's puzzled stare becomes a hardened glare. She sighs loudly, and Harry finally turns to look at her. “What?” he asks, still not looking into her eyes.

“Did I do something?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Since you left to go—go write a letter or whatever the hell it was you were doing in your room—you've just been ignoring me. What did I do? Was it something I said? How do you think it's fair that you can just be so rude? I made a bloody huge amount of cookies, and you haven't even tried any of them!”

When did the cookies become a part of this? she asks herself angrily. But it's too late. She's already worked up beyond belief.

"And then you don't even thank me for dinner, which, yes, didn't take very long—but I mean, come on, you could have at least *muttered* the words. Or helped with the dishes, as opposed to just coming out her and sulking in front of the bloody television. I don't know what I did that makes you think you can just pretend I don't exist, but whatever it is -"

Harry puts his hand to her mouth. He looks up and notices that there's a little flour on her nose. Her cheeks are red, from working herself up, and her ponytail is coming slightly undone, pieces of curly hair flying in all directions.

She's adorable.

And he starts to laugh, lowering his hand.

"What's so *funny?*" she spits out.

"Hermione, you have—you have -" Harry tries to regain his composure, but another fit of giggles overcomes him. "You have—you have flour on your nose."

Hermione raises her hand to her nose, utterly mortified. She made those cookies *hours* ago! Did she have flour on her nose when she was hugging him? She must have looked positively ridiculous, scolding Harry for ignoring her while she had flour on her nose.

Harry's giggles cease, but he chuckles a little when he notices her scraping frantically at her nose.

"It's here," he says, wiping away the flour. "No big deal." He sighs. "I'm sorry, Hermione. I—I didn't mean to ignore you, or be ungrateful. Dinner was wonderful. And I was going to eat a cookie during a commercial break. Honest. And I'm sorry I laughed while you were trying to be serious." He grins. "You did look really cute just then, though. I couldn't help myself."

Hermione allows herself to smile a little, even though she's still utterly embarrassed.

"I must have looked like a right idiot," she says.

"No—just cute."

He has to watch what he's saying. He can't allow himself to make comments like that. It's too dangerous.

Hermione's not sure why he's calling her cute so much.

It's a slightly condescending word.

Is this just more proof that he doesn't see her any new way?

He'll never see me any other way.

"So," Harry says, breaking into her thoughts. "What do you want to watch?"

Hermione's head is resting against his shoulder, and she's sleeping, unaware of the noise coming from the television. Harry strokes her hair, alternating between studying her and watching the screen.

He yawns.

He's tired.

He doesn't really want to move.

Her breathing is steady, and she looks so peaceful.

She looks beautiful.

He touches her face lightly.

"Hermione?"

She doesn't answer.

“Hermione?”

“Mmm,” she moans into his arm.

“Time for bed,” he says.

“I’m not tired.”

Harry smiles. She’s like a little child.

“Come on. Up you get.”

“Can you carry me?”

Harry hesitates, and then he slowly gets up. He puts her arms around his neck, lifting her legs. He walks through the kitchen, down the hallway to her bedroom. He lays her over the sheets, pulling them out from underneath her body.

“Goodnight, Hermione,” he whispers.

Suddenly, she puts her hands around his neck again, pulling his face to hers. Her eyes don’t even flicker open as she presses her lips, very lightly, to his.

Harry feels the tingling sensation throughout his body, and he knows he can’t just let her keep kissing him. It hurts too much, to know she doesn’t realise she’s doing it.

Her arms fall to her sides.

Her breathing is completely steady.

He pulls away. “Goodnight, Hermione,” he whispers again. He brushes some hair out of her face, and leaves the room, shutting the door behind him.

When the doorbell rings, Hermione is reading *The Daily Prophet*, her feet propped up on the table and a cup of tea clasped in her hands. She sighs, and gets up, opening the door.

“Viktor,” she says, surprised. “What on earth are you doing here?”

His hair is slicked back, and he’s wearing nice robes.

He’s holding a bunch of flowers in his hand. She can’t figure out what kind they are, but they smell nice.

They’re actually quite ugly.

“Hermione,” he says smoothly. His accent is still quite strong, but he’s learned how to pronounce her name. That has to count for something, right?

“Please, come in.” Hermione opens the door wider, and Viktor steps past her. All too late, she remembers that she’s wearing her dumpiest clothing. At least her stomach is concealed.

“How—how have you been?” she asks. “Can I get you a cup of tea?”

“That would be wonderful, thank you.” He hands her the flowers.

Who ever decided that bright red and orange-checkered flowers with brown centres were *pretty*?

Hermione smiles up at him (he is rather tall), and then she walks into the kitchen. She grabs a glass pitcher out of the cabinet, stuffing the flowers into it and adding water. She then sets the kettle to boil and turns around.

Viktor is standing there, watching her. He’s got a strange expression on his face, and he’s just watching her.

It’s actually kind of creepy.

Her coughs. “So,” she says uncomfortably. “How is, um, how is the team doing? Are you and Ron getting on all right?”

Krum nods. “He’s a very good Keeper.”

“Yes, I know.”

There’s an awkward silence, and Hermione begins to gnaw on her fingernails, a habit she seems to have picked up from Harry.

“So, not to sound like I’m *not* glad you stopped by, but is there anything that brings you here?” Hermione asks Krum. He’s still watching her every move, and it’s really starting to make her nervous. The kettle starts to whistle, and Hermione removes it from the heat.

Krum clears his throat. “Vell,” he begins awkwardly. “I haff not been able to contact you. It seems you stopped receiving my letters a year or so after I left.”

Hermione blushes, grateful to have her back turned to Krum as she pours the hot water into a mug. She had kept up her correspondence with him until the beginning of sixth year. He continued to send her letters for a few months, which she didn’t even bother to look at.

“I never got any letters,” she lies quickly. “And I did write you several times before giving up.”

She could have just been honest. As she hands him the mug, she feels terrible. She should be honest with him. She should tell him that she enjoyed all the time she spent with him, that he really is a great guy, but she isn’t interested. That’s where he’s headed, isn’t it? He’s going to ask if they can pick up where they left off.

Hermione touches her stomach instinctively. She’s sure her skin is blotchy, and she had to enchant her robes to fit over her stomach. She looks terrible right now, she’s sure of it. Maybe he’ll have second thoughts.

He’s *still* studying her.

Now it’s just plain annoying.

“*What?*” Hermione asks exasperatedly. “Why are you just staring at me?”

Krum blinks and sets down his tea. He walks towards her and grabs one of her hands in his own, touching her cheek with the other.

“Hermione,” he says. “I-I vant you to know -”

Hermione tries not to cough. She can tell he’s wearing that new wizard’s cologne that everyone else seems to think is so wonderful. It’s suffocating, and his hair isn’t slicked back with gel, it’s just greasy, and his nose is incredibly large and crooked, and—

“I am very much in love with you.”

Any other witch would have collapsed at the way he said it. At the way he looked into her eyes and said those words.

But not Hermione. It was too rehearsed, too pathetic. He has changed too much for her to see any of the things she saw as a fourteen-year old girl. He is different.

Or maybe she’s different.

Mabe it’s because she’s in love with someone else.

She begins to open her mouth to respond, but he puts his finger to her lips.

“I vant to marry you, Hermione. My Herm-own-ninny.”

There’s silence for a few moments.

“WHAT?” Hermione explodes, pushing Krum away from her. “Are you CRAZY? Marry you? What the bloody hell is wrong with you?”

Krum stares at her, confused.

“Hermione, I -”

Her blood is boiling. Ok, so it was slightly embarrassing when he was admitting that he still had feelings for her. But she could have just said simply that she wasn’t interested, and he would have exited her life with her memory of him from when she was fourteen still intact. But not now.

“You don’t *love* me, you don’t even know me! How dare you come here, with you ugly flowers and your nice suit, and expect that you can just ask me to marry you!”

“But –”

“I was fourteen years old! Did you honestly think it was going to go anywhere? Really?”

“Hermione -”

“This is ridiculous! I can’t believe you actually came here, thinking you could just propose! Just like that! I am *pregnant*! Do you really think I can just up and marry you?”

Krum’s eyes widen. “You’re *pregnant*?”

“Yes.” Hermione cups her stomach. “I’m pregnant.”

He stares at her stomach in amazement. “But-but ...” He breaks off, shaking his head. “That’s not possible.”

“I’m pregnant,” she repeats. “I am going to have a baby in May. I can’t marry you.”

“Who-who is the father?”

Hermione shakes her head. “No,” she says. “That’s none of your business.” She’s still breathing heavily from the effort of yelling, and she feels very tired. She goes to the kitchen table and sits down, folding her hands in her lap.

Krum doesn’t say anything for a while, running his hands through his disgusting hair. And then he sits down next to her.

“Hermione—is it Harry Potter?”

Hermione doesn’t say anything, and Krum takes her silence as a yes. Krum breathes out angrily. “That-That *svirkadjia!* That *kote!*”

“Viktor -”

“Do you love him?” Krum grips her arm tightly, his eyes blazing.

“W-what?”

Krum stands, forcing her to stand up too. She whimpers slightly as he tightens his hand on her arm.

“Do you love him?” he repeats, putting his face close to hers.

“Viktor -”

“You do! You do, don’t you? That-how dare he!” He presses Hermione against the counter, his hands on her wrists.

“Viktor, you’re hurting me!” Hermione cries out, desperately trying to pull away.

The front door slams shut, and Krum freezes. Quickly, he clasps his hand over Hermione’s mouth before she can make any more sounds.

“Hermione?” Harry’s voice calls from the hall. “Are you here? Listen, I know this will sound really strange, but I thought maybe we could go out tonight -”

Krum steps away from Hermione quickly when he realises that Harry is coming into the kitchen. But he doesn’t move fast enough. Harry sees, and he stops. Hermione rubs her wrists, her eyes wide as she sinks slowly to the floor.

Harry hurries over to her, kneeling beside her. He takes her wrists, studying the marks from Krum’s fingers. He looks up at Krum.

“What the hell were you doing to her?”

Krum’s frown deepens. “You bastard,” he says.

“What were you doing to her?” Harry yells.

Krum studies Hermione. “You chose *him*? Why him? What is he?”

Without waiting for an answer, he walks out of the kitchen. The door slams shut a few seconds later.

Hermione throws her hands around Harry's neck, sobbing wordlessly.

He strokes her hair. "You're all right," he says soothingly. "You're all right."

"I don't know what happened. He just—he came in here, asked me to *marry* him, and when I told him I was pregnant, and he guessed that you were the father, he just—he got so angry, and he grabbed me, and he started yelling at me in Bulgarian."

Harry's throat is very dry.
"I vant to know wot there is between you and Hermy-own-ninny."

"Nothing. She's not my girlfriend and she never has been."

"Oh, Hermione," he groans. "He—during the Triwizard Tournament, he asked me if we were dating, and I said no. He must think that I meant I never *would*, either."

Hermione looks up at Harry, slightly confused. "Well, Harry, we're not dating."

Harry's blood turns cold. "Yeah, yeah I know," he stutters. "I just meant—well, I bet he didn't think you'd be pregnant because of me, either."

He doesn't meet her eye.

Hermione nods slowly. "I'm glad you came in when you did," she says quietly. "I was—I was so scared." She rests her head on his shoulder. "I feel kind of dizzy, actually."

"From all the movement," Harry says quickly, helping her up and supporting her to the kitchen table.

Hermione collapses into a seat. "He asked me to marry him," she says disbelievingly.

"Well, do you -" Harry hesitates, knowing he shouldn't push it. He's already given himself away a little, but he can't help it. "Do you have any interest in him?" he blurts out.

Hermione shakes her head immediately. "No! Not at all!" She sighs. "I actually stopped responding to his letters when—when I finally realised how much I liked Ron." She laughs. "And I didn't try to pick it back up when things with Ron didn't work out."

Harry nods, relieved.

There's a pounding on the door. Harry and Hermione both jump. He stands up, taking out his wand. "It's probably Krum again," he says. "Stay here."

"Harry -"

"It's all right, Hermione."

He walks slowly to the hall. In one swift movement, he opens the door, throwing out his wand.

"Bloody hell. Paranoid or something, Harry?"

"Ron," Harry gasps. "I-I thought you might be -"

"Krum," Ron says, shaking his head as he walks in. Harry shuts the door. "I know what happened. I guess it's my fault, in some way."

"What do you mean?"

Harry and Ron walk into the kitchen.

"Are you all right?" Ron asks. "Did he hurt you?" Hermione shakes her head, and Ron walks over to her, kissing the top of her head. He sits down. "Look, here's what happened. At practice a couple of weeks ago, Krum asked me about you, Hermione. I told him you were doing well, and that he should stop by and see you some time. And I gave him your address." He hesitates. "He asked if you were dating anyone, and I told him you weren't. I didn't have the heart to tell him you were pregnant."

"And so he assumed he could come over and ask me to *marry* him?" Hermione asks, shaking her head. "Ridiculous."

“Yeah, I, uh, he told me he asked you that.”

“Did you just see him?”

“I bumped into him on his way out of here. He was heading for the Leaky Cauldron, and I was going to come over here, just to say hi, since I was in the area. He started yelling at me for not telling him that you were pregnant—he seemed particularly put off that it was your baby, Harry.” Ron’s eyes are twinkling, and Harry glares at his friend. “Anyway, once he had calmed down a little, he asked me to tell you that he was sorry.” Ron frowns. “He has quite a temper sometimes, you know. At practise—well, he’s sorry, Hermione. And so am I.”

Hermione smiles graciously. “It’s all right, I guess. I feel kind of sorry for disappointing him.” She studies the flowers. “Those have got to be the most hideous things I have ever seen.” She stands up, taking them out of the pitcher and tossing them into the trashcan. “Red and orange-checkered—*honestly*.”

Ron coughs. “He, um, he made them look like that, you know. Put his wand to some tulips or something. He said he was sure you liked them.”

Harry blushes slightly.

Later, he tells himself.

“Well,” says Ron. “I was planning on surprising you two, inviting you out to dinner. But if -”

“Actually, I was thinking that, too,” Harry says.

And even though he had planned on it being just him and Hermione, he doesn’t mind that Ron’s suggested it. Honestly, the idea of it being all three of them is nice.

Hermione smiles. “That sounds *wonderful*,” she says enthusiastically. “But—I need to clean myself up a little.” She gestures towards her clothing.

“Me, too,” Harry says, looking down at his work robes.

“It’ll just take a few minutes,” Hermione promises Ron. “You can have that tea, if you like.” She points at Krum’s practically untouched cup, and exits quickly.

Harry turns to Ron. “Could you make it any more obvious?” “What?” Ron asks innocently. “Oh. You mean the comment on Krum being mad at you because you’re the one with Hermione.”

“We’re not together,” Harry hisses. “There’s nothing there!”

“And my hair isn’t red,” Ron scoffs. “She’s going to find out at some point, you know.”

“Ron, listen to me. I need you to swear that you won’t tell her.”

“Harry -”

“Swear you won’t tell her!”

Ron sighs. “I promise. But honestly, Harry. I think you should—soon.”

Harry turns away. “I’m going to go change. I’ll be fast.”

“So, Hermione, how is working at home turning out?”

She rolls her eyes. She had hoped working at home during the pregnancy would be a good thing: it wasn’t. “I just feel so detached,” she explains. “I’m going to be so behind on paperwork by the time I get back.”

“Hermione, this isn’t school, you know—this isn’t your *homework*,” Ron teases her. “You’ll be fine, I guarantee. I bet you’re handling it all right.”

“It just gets a little boring,” she admits. “At least in the office, I had some connection to everyone else. At home, I just have … me.”

Home.

Harry takes a sip of his Firewhiskey.

Home.

Does she feel at home with him?

“But sometimes, it’s a good thing, I guess.” She shrugs. “It’s all right. And it means I get to spend more time with mum and dad.”

Harry nods. There was one night when she actually decided to stay the night in her own room.

He hated it. Hated lying on his bed, knowing she wasn’t in the next room. He had become so accustomed to sensing her presence, just feet away, a thin wall between him and her—the apartment, which had seemed so perfectly fit for him before she moved in, now seems too big for him when she isn’t inside of it. And he doesn’t understand why.

“And what about you, Harry? You *never* talk about work.”

“There hasn’t been much lately,” he says slowly. “I mean—we don’t have anything new and exciting. It’s the same old.” He pauses. “I’m rather bored, too, honestly. I don’t really think that the Ministry is all it’s hyped up to be.”

“I think it’s more that, now that you’ve gone against the worst things anyone could imagine, everything pales in comparison,” Hermione says.

Harry shrugs, slightly embarrassed. “Maybe.”

Maybe it’s just her imagination, but she can feel something from him that she hadn’t noticed before.

No, she’s sure she’s imagining. She wants so desperately to believe that something is there that she is pretending there is.

Right?

Maybe not. The way he’s looking at her right now, his eyes glowing in the candlelight, the smile playing on his lips … is there something?

He blinks and turns his head away from her.

No, there is nothing.

It's quite late when they enter the apartment. Harry helps Hermione take her coat off, running his fingers through her hair without thinking. She doesn't seem to notice, but it sends shivers through him.

"That was lovely," she says. "I'm so glad we went out." She sighs. "And I'm so sorry about—about the Viktor thing."

Harry shakes his head. "It's not your fault. I can understand why he'd still be completely infatuated with you."

I didn't mean to say that. Did she notice his hint?

Hermione laughs, apparently oblivious. "Thanks, I guess."

They walk into the living room, and Hermione notices something blue and white on the coffee table.

"Harry, what's *that*?"

He spots what she was pointing at. He totally forgot. "Oh, those—well, I—" He laughs. "There's a little flower shop that just opened, in Diagon Alley. And, well, I remembered that you really like —"

"Forget-me-nots," Hermione says, studying the little bouquet. "They're my favourite." She smiles.

"I thought they were completely inferior to Krum's, so, I, uh, decided to hold off on giving them to you," Harry explains with a smile.

Hermione laughs. "They're *lovely*," she says. "That's so sweet of you."

She looks at him, standing there, just looking back at her. He doesn't stare her down with the creepy intent she found on Krum's face. He just looks at her.

Or is he looking through her?

No, he's looking *at* her.

But is he looking at her any differently that he did before this all began?

She can't tell.

She walks over to him and kisses his cheek. "Thank you," she says, feeling colour flush to her cheeks in spite of her attempts to keep it under control.

Harry tries to find his voice. "You're welcome," he manages.

Hermione walks to the kitchen and places them into the empty pitcher that had been filled with Krum's hideous flowers. "I think I'm going to put them in my room, if that's all right," she calls to him.

"Yeah, sure," Harry calls back. He closes his eyes.

He doesn't know how much longer he can keep this up.

Four and a half months is a very long time.

Hermione sets the flowers on her bedside table, breathing out heavily as she sits down. She wishes she could explain to him how much these flowers mean to her. That he was actually thinking of her! —but it was probably just an impulse. He saw the shop and walked in. A simple move. It was probably nothing to him.

Harry sits down on the couch and puts his head in his hands.

He can feel himself spinning out of control.

Hermione feels fluttering in her stomach.

The baby.

This is why he's still here.

He's here for the baby.

Not for her.

The house is completely silent except for the sound of their breathing.

Harry stares down at the letter, his hands trembling slightly.

This is impossible.

He sits down on the edge of his bed and reads it again.

Over and over, he stares down at the words.

Harry,

We found her. Finally. Her cover is pretty bloody impressive, to be honest. We need you here as soon as possible. Everything will be explained when you get here.

Lupin.

Cryptic, but Harry understands.

Bellatrix Lestrange.

All the hatred churns inside of him, coursing through his veins.

The one he never found.

Harry puts the letter down, rubbing his eyes furiously. He can't make this decision right now. He can't choose between hunting down Bellatrix Lestrange and staying here with Hermione. He just can't.

He hadn't anticipated this. True, since Sirius's letter, his desire to find her had been relit, and he had gone into work every day since with new determination. But he hadn't found anything. And he hadn't expected to find anything.

Why now?

“Harry?”

Hermione's standing in the door, a tentative smile on her face. “I—I heard you talking to Hedwig. Did she bring you anything interesting?”

“I'm so sorry,” Harry says quickly. “I should have been quieter—I didn't mean to wake you up.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” She walks in to his room slowly. “I was already awake, anyway.” She looks at him, concerned. “Are you all right? You look like there’s a lot on your mind.”

If you only knew, he thinks, watching her move towards his bed slowly. She sits down next to him.

“It’s just – well see,” he stutters, stalling for time.

How can he even begin?

“Harry, what’s going on?”

Harry sighs.

He can’t hide this from her.

“They’ve - they’ve found Bellatrix.”

Hermione gasps.

“I don’t know how, I don’t know where she is, but they’ve found her.” He stops. He doesn’t know what else to say, so he hands her the small scroll of parchment.

Hermione reads it quickly. She knows what this means. Of course she does. His hatred for Bellatrix has grown stronger since Mrs Weasley found the letter from Sirius. He’s been working like a madman with the team, tracking down every single Death Eater that escaped. Bellatrix is the very last.

She can sense his hesitation as he sits here next to her. She knows he won’t be able to make this decision.

And, even though she can feel her throat constricting as her lip begins to tremble, even though she knows that she wants him to stay, to be with her ... she understands. She knows. It *kills*, really, and she’s having difficulty breathing. But this is what Harry needs to do.

“You need to go,” she says quietly, rolling up the paper.

“What?”

“You heard me. You need to go.”

“But Hermione, I don’t know if -”

“I know,” she says. “You need to go.” She stares straight into his eyes. Can he read her mind? She’s saying it, over and over again. *I love you. I love you. I love you.* Does he know that? “You need to go,” she repeats.

I love you, she adds in her head.

Hermione watches him. *Don’t even think about crying*, she orders herself.

But she can’t help it.

What if something goes wrong?

She feels her stomach. Her baby is moving.

His baby.

Their baby.

He turns towards her. “I’ll be back as soon as I can,” he promises, running his fingers through his hair.

He’s nervous. She can tell. He bites his thumbnail. She bites hers.

He’s standing near the door, and she’s across the room.

It feels like there are miles between them.

“Are you sure about this?” he asks again.

Hermione nods, her eyes watering a little. But she doesn’t cry.

He fastens his cloak. “Owl me if anything happens. Do you promise? Hedwig will find me.”

“But isn’t that dangerous?”

“I don’t care. I want to know if anything happens. Understand me?”

“I promise,” she whispers.

Harry doesn’t know what else to say. He walks to her, hugs her, and turns away, walking towards the door.

“Harry -” she begins, and stops, watching him turn towards her.

She can’t.

He looks for answers in her face, but he can’t find any.

Her lip trembles as she steps towards him.

Their lips meet, only for a brief moment.

But it’s enough.

“Go,” Hermione says, wiping her cheeks.

Harry hesitates.

“Go,” she repeats forcefully.

Harry nods.

And he leaves.

Hermione tosses on the bed. She can blame the insomnia on the baby, and the back pains that started up last week, but she knows it's more than that. Since he left almost a month ago, the apartment has felt so ... empty. Cold. Silent. It's so uncomfortable without him here. Even knowing he was in a different room gave her a sense of comfort. Now, all she has are her own thoughts and Ron's persistent check-ups that got old after the first day. Ron's intentions are good, that's for sure, but he's no Harry. This isn't Ron's area of expertise.

He's not Harry.

It's weird. At eleven, at fourteen, at seventeen, at twenty, all she had been able to see was Harry's nobleness. She knew he loved her, of course, and she loved him, too, but she hadn't considered him anything but a hero and a friend. And now ...

She rolls onto her side, groans, and lies on her back again.

I miss him.

She cries a little, like she has every night. She can blame it on the insomnia, and she can blame it on the back pains, and she can blame it on the blotchy skin, the hormones, the shortness of breath ... but it's more than that.

So much more.

It's raining.

Harry pulls his cloak more tightly around his body, shivering slightly. He peers out of the small cave he's huddling in. There's a light glowing from the small house he's been watching for hours. He shakes his head and bends back over the parchment paper.

Hermione,

Everything has been set into motion.

We're going to get her.

I'm so bloody nervous. And at the same time, I'm ready for this. I've never been more ready.

I wish you were here. I want you to hug me and tell me everything will be all right. To kiss my cheek like you always did, before any of this happened. Actually, no, I wish you would do more than that. I want you to kiss me on my lips and tell me you love me. I want you to promise me that you'll never leave me. I want –

Harry stops and wipes everything away with one sweep of his wand. He hesitates, and rewrites the one sentence.

I wish you were here.

I miss you.

Harry.

He rolls up the paper and turns to Hedwig, who has been napping by his side. He strokes her feathers gently, and her eyes open. She clicks her beak and offers her leg to him. He attaches the letter, and she nips his nose affectionately. She stares at him as forcefully as an old owl can. *Be safe, she orders him.*

Harry smiles, marvelling at how this owl seems to know what's going to come next. "I'll be all right," he promises. "And you be careful, too."

He watches her as she flies out into the rain.

Take care of Hermione for me.

"Harry?" a gruff voice says behind him.

Harry turns. Moody is hobbling towards him. *Still alive, Harry marvels.* They shake hands.

"What a piece of work she is, that one. All the others—dead, locked up—and she refuses to give herself up." Moody looks up into the rain. "I think she still believes that the Dark Lord will rise—again and again and again."

Harry nods, remaining silent.

“You all right?” Moody asks, and then adds, before Harry can answer, “That was a bloody stupid question. Of course you aren’t. And yet you are.”

Harry frowns.

That didn’t even make sense.

Moody pats him on the shoulder. “This will all be over very soon,” he says in a hoarse whisper. “It will all be over,” he repeats, and turns away.

Harry watches him go, wondering if that man will ever die. He chuckles a little, walking out of the cave.

This will all be over very soon.

He walks over to the main tent, hidden by trees and bushes. Lupin and Tonks are bent over pieces of parchment paper and photographs of Bellatrix. He watches them, almost in awe. *They* figured it out, right? They are meant for each other. Lupin, with his wrinkles and his quiet dignity. Tonks with her bubblegum pink hair and her clumsiness.

They love each other. There’s no question about it.

Lupin looks up and sees Harry. He smiles, and Harry attempts to smile back, his stomach twisted into an enormous knot.

“You almost ready?” Lupin asks, stepping away from the table and stretching his back.

He already knows the answer.

Harry is more than ready.

“This will all be over very soon,” Lupin says, sitting down in a wooden chair. Tonks smiles at Harry, turning her head back to the papers.

“She’s created a whole life for herself,” she says. “Well, I guess it’s more that she’s taken someone else’s life.”

Moody comes into the tent, dripping with water. His grey hair hangs loosely from his skull.

“It’s time, Harry.”

Harry nods, and looks back at Tonks and Lupin. She’s joined her husband at the chair, gripping his hand tightly.

“Be safe,” she says softly.

But when he looks at her, he doesn’t see Tonks.

All he can see is Hermione.

Be safe.

He turns back to Moody, pulling the hood of his cloak over his head. He tucks his wand into his sleeve.

Be safe.

Her voice, echoing in his ears.

She’s the girl, isn’t she?

He takes another step forward, out of the tent.

Be safe.

The rain beats down onto his cloak, and he doesn’t feel a thing.

The image of Sirius, falling backwards, eyes wide, comes into Harry’s mind.

You need to go, Hermione says in his head.

Bellatrix’s face swims through his mind.

Go.

The anger courses through his veins as he breathes in, breathes out.

It's time.

Bellatrix Lestrange is sitting in her living room, right near the fire. Actually, it's not really *her* living room. Olivia's. But Olivia is locked up in a trunk right now, so it's Bellatrix's home.

It's been a long day. She sighs, touching her face. There are wrinkles, but they aren't hers. Olivia, locked up in a trunk, hidden to her husband, Edward ... these wrinkles, this hideous blond-grey hair ... they are Olivia's.

Bellatrix isn't even sure why she's put so much effort into this. There is no one left but her, and it's getting *boring*, honestly. Living like a Mudblood. Pathetic. She's going slightly mad.

She peers at the clock on the mantelpiece, starting to feel impatient and slightly worried. Where on earth is Edward, anyway? Bellatrix winces. She honestly detests the man, the stupid, pathetic Mudblood, but she always feels uneasy when he takes a long while to get home from work.

Bellatrix leans back in the chair and shuts her eyes.

It's been a long day.

She hears the front door slam shut.

Back into character, she commands herself, rising from the chair, rising to the occasion.

“Ed, darling, is that you?”
A shadow stretches out across the hall, and she hears footsteps.

“Edward?”

The footsteps stop. The fire *oops*, and sizzles out, and all of the lights in the house shut off.

Bellatrix takes out her wand. “*Lumos*,” she mutters, the tip of her wand igniting. She holds it out in front of her, searching for a figure.

“*Expelliarmus!*” a voice cries out. As her wand flies out of her hand, Bellatrix is lifted into the air and slammed against a wall. She crumples to the ground, glancing up in time to see a cloaked figure walking towards her with a wand in each hand.

She closes her eyes, concentrating. *Stup—*

“*Petrificus Totalus!*” the stranger screams, and Bellatrix’s arms and legs snap shut. Her eyes are wide and frozen as she watches him come into the light. He pauses, his eyes shadowed by the hood of his robes. “I think this is the first time I’ve seen you look so desperate.”

Bellatrix tries frenziedly to move, her body searing with pain from her fall.

“It took me a very long time to find you,” he says. “Congratulations, you fooled us all—for a while. You were the only one—the only one.” He clears his throat. “I’m guessing you’re wondering how we found you.” His voice is soft, childlike, even. But his mouth is curled in disdain. “I don’t think it’s even worth it to tell you.” He spreads his arms wide. “Here we are. That’s all that matters, I think.” He pauses. “I’m sure you’d like to talk.” He waves his wand at her, and her mouth opens.

“Who are you?” she asks, trying to keep the hint of malice in her voice.

The lips twitch into a small smile, and he steps back into the shadows.

“Are you going to kill me?” Bellatrix demands.

“Kill you? No. I am not a killer. Only once. Only once.”

“Then what will you do with me?”

“It’s not for me to decide.” He pauses. “The others will be here soon. I came first, because there was something I wanted to tell you.”

“And what would that be?”

“I wanted you to know I hate you.”

Bellatrix laughs. “Is that all? Who are you?” she adds. “Come into the light, show your face, you coward! Too afraid to fight me, to kill me! Show your face!”

There’s silence for a several moments. Bellatrix lets out short, shallow breaths.

“I am the Boy Who Lived,” comes a voice from the opposite side of the room. And then there is silence more.

Bellatrix snarls in rage. “Harry Potter! Come and fight me, you coward! Come out and fight me like a man!”

The front door slams shut as Bellatrix continues to scream. But Harry doesn’t listen. All he can hear is the thumping of his heart, ringing in his ears. He nods at Lupin when he reaches the bushes. “She’s all yours,” he says quietly.

Hermione’s eyes flutter open the moment she hears the door slam shut. She sits up, wincing with pain. She sets her legs on the floor, standing up as quickly as she can. It’s still dark, and all of the lights in the house are off. She stumbles out of her room, clinging to the wall.

She reaches the living room to find Harry, shivering in a sodden cloak, his wand still clutched tightly in one hand. There is an intensity in his eyes that was not there before—and there is peace.

She is beautiful, just standing there, the moonlight shining down onto half of her face. Her hands are clenched in fists, and she’s just staring straight back at him. And inside of his head, he’s telling her the things he just can’t possibly say out loud.

I love you.

I want to be with you.

I want to marry you.

I love you. I love you. I love you.

In three swift steps, he reaches her, and he pulls her towards him, and she clamps her arms around his neck, burying her face in his wet chest. They crumble to the floor, and Hermione feels his body shuddering against her. She strokes his hair, feeling his breath against her neck and the baby inside of her.

Her body is so warm. He can feel her stomach pressed against him, and he puts one hand to it, almost instinctively. His baby.

Her baby.

Their baby.

“I can’t possibly go,” Hermione insists, studying the invitation. “I’m pregnant!”

“Hermione, you have to go!” Ron says, his eyes wide. “It’s Ginny’s birthday, all right? She really wants you there!”

“This is absurd, Ron. It will be embarrassing for me, and you know it!”

“Why on earth would it possibly be embarrassing?”

Hermione raises her eyebrows and points at her hugely protruding belly.

“Well, yeah, it is kind of obvious at this point, but everyone who is going to be there already knows.”

“Oh, great, that makes me feel so much better,” Hermione snaps sarcastically.

“Hermione, you’re being ridiculous. Just come. It would mean so much to Ginny.”

Hermione doesn’t say anything, crossing her arms over her chest.

“Just think about it, all right?” Ron rises, kissing Hermione on the forehead. “I’ve got practise—I’ll tell Krum you’ve changed your mind, that you *do* want to marry him, shall I?”

“Very funny,” Hermione says, allowing herself to smile a little. She can’t help it—Ron *does* make her feel better.

“Say hello to Harry for me, yeah?”

“Of course,” Hermione says, and Ron smiles a little before walking out of the door into the Wizarding World.

Hermione sighs, sitting back down, trying to ignore the pain in her stomach. She looks down at the invitation, written in Ginny’s loopy scrawl. She rests her hands on her belly.

Ginny had written a little note in the margin.

I know you're expecting and all that, but it is my birthday, and I'd love it if you could be there.

Well yes, that's all sweet and cute, but—the baby! And besides, she has nothing to wear. Hermione sighs. She could blame it on the clothes, really. Say she didn't have time to find something. Or she could just admit that the reason she's hesitating is because she doesn't really want people pressing their ears to her stomach and telling her how great she looks considering how far along she is. Or asking her—asking her when she and Harry are going to tie the knot. Because that, most certainly, is never going to happen.

Hermione sighs. She's being stupid. She knows she is. She heaves herself up again and walks slowly, carefully down the hallway. It's almost ridiculous how much time it takes her just to get to her room. Honestly. She's practically sweating by the time she reaches the opening into her closet. Her dress robes she owns are tucked in the back. She tugs them gently off of their hangers and walks back into her room. Taking a deep breath, she slides her current, everyday robe off and shimmies into the top dress robe. Or rather, she attempts to. The material will simply not go over her stomach.

Stupid, Hermione tells herself angrily as she takes it off again (with some difficulty), picking up her wand and pointing it at the robe. “*Accidius!*” she cries. She watches the pale green fabric stretch with some satisfaction, finally putting it back on again. It fits perfectly.

Hermione looks in the mirror and frowns. The dark, blotchy spots on her face have disappeared, which is a good thing. In fact, her skin is pretty darn clear. But ... oh, she knows she shouldn't be feeling like this, that it's typical in pregnancy, but ... she feels *fat*. And *that* doesn't feel very good at all.

Hermione points her wand at each of the robes on her bed, muttering the charm over and over again. She sets the first robe on the ground and pulls the next, a red one over her head. It's even worse than the first, and the neckline is completely wrong. She shakes her head and tries on the next. No good.

Hermione feels tears stinging her eyes, and she doesn't even know why she's crying. They're just dress robes, for crying out loud! She

looks down at the maroon satin dress, her stomach sticking out, and her tears drop onto the fabric as she collapses on the floor.

The front door slams shut, but Hermione doesn't hear it as she continues to sob into her hands. And she doesn't hear Harry's footsteps.

But she *does* hear his cough at the doorway, and she jumps up as fast as a girl eight months pregnant possibly could.

"Hermione? What's wrong?"

Harry drops his bag to the floor and walks swiftly to her. He circles his arms around her waist, surprised at his boldness. But—since he returned, he's been surprising himself quite a bit.

He's more surprised that she never pulls away.

Hermione sniffls a little, refusing to lift her head. "It's just—I tried on all of these robes, for Ginny's birthday party, and they just look—they look *terrible*."

Harry forces himself not to burst out laughing. "I'm sure it's not that bad, Hermione," he says, trying to keep a straight face.

"No, they really do," Hermione insists. "I look like a fat pig with a terrible complexion and unruly hair and -"

"Hermione, don't you think you're being just a wee bit hard on yourself?"

"No," she says firmly, pouting her lips.

Who would've thought Hermione Granger would be like this? Harry wonders. He can't help it. A small smile comes across his mouth.

"You know I'm right!" she cries, pulling away. "I look horrible. Horrible, horrible, horrible." She wads up the red dress and tosses it into the corner for emphasis.

“Hermione, you’re being ridiculous!” Harry takes her wrists to stop her from grabbing the other dresses. “You’re *pregnant*. And, quite frankly, I think you’re beautiful just the way you are.”

Hermione looks up, surprised. “You—you think I’m pretty?”

Harry nods.

How did he get so audacious?

“Now,” he says quietly. “Are there any dresses you *haven’t* tried yet?”

Hermione wipes her eyes and nods. “Just two.” She gestures towards the robes still folded on her bed. Harry picks up a blue one and studies it, frowning slightly. It’s pretty, sure, but it’s not *Hermione*. He sets it back on the bed and lifts the next. It’s deep purple, with a delicate trim of lace.

Harry turns to Hermione. “This,” he says.

“Harry, last time I wore that, Ron told me I looked like a cow,” Hermione says. Stubbornly, Harry presses the robe into her hands. “Then again, Ron has no taste,” she adds, smiling a little.

Harry nods, turning his back to her. “Put it on,” he says over his shoulder.

Hermione studies his back before quickly pulling off the maroon robe and stepping into the purple dress. She can’t zip it up all the way. “It’s on,” she says softly.

Harry turns slowly, sucking his breath in while trying to make sure it *doesn’t* sound like he’s sucking his breath in. But he can’t help it.

She looks positively amazing.

“Is it that bad?” Hermione guesses, her eyes beginning to water again. “Turn around, I’ll take it off –”

Harry finds his voice. “No!” he says forcefully. “No, it looks—it looks great, actually.”

Hermione studies his face. Has he ever looked at her like that before? "You mean it?"

"Yes, I mean it. Look at yourself."

Hermione turns towards the mirror. Despite the fact that her hair is greasy and her face is oily, her skin is glowing in a way that it never had before. The material clings to her body in all the right places, loose in the places that need to be hidden.

It's perfect.

"What do you think?" Harry asks her after a few moments.

Hermione tucks a strand of hair behind her ear. "It'll do," she says softly. They both laugh. "Ok, you were right. It's great." She smiles. "Thanks, Harry," she adds quietly.

"Any time." He clears his throat. "So we are going, then? Now that your outfit problem has been fixed?"

Hermione shoves him. "Yes, we're going."

Harry grins, and then shuffles his feet, pretending to be bashful. "Well, Miss Granger," he says shyly. "I would, um, love it if you would, um, attend this, um, party with me. Only if you'd like to, of course."

Hermione hits him playfully. "Of course, Mr Potter. That would be wonderful."

"Fantastic." Harry grins again. "I'll pick you up next Saturday at six."

"It's a date," Hermione agrees.

Harry leaves her room, promising that dinner is on the way.

Hermione sits down on her bed, shaking her head.

Was he flirting with her?

Harry pulls a pot out of a drawer.

Was she flirting with him?

“Don’t be nervous,” Harry instructs Hermione as they walk slowly towards the house. He looks over his shoulder. Hermione is taking very, very small steps. Baby steps. He tries not to smile at the thought.

“How can I not be nervous? This was a terrible idea. I should have just stayed home and watched the television all night.”

“Yes, I’m sure that would have been *quite* entertaining,” Harry says, trying to keep the humour out of his voice. “I’m sure this will be fun.” He waits until Hermione reaches him. She stops, hesitating. He presses his hand on her back, taking care not to push too hard as he steers her forward. They reach the lopsided door, and Harry knocks.

Several moments later, Ginny opens it. She’s dressed in a deep green robe, her hair pulled into an elaborate bun at the top of her head. Her eyes are glowing and her cheeks are flushed.

“You *came!*” she cries out enthusiastically. She embraces Hermione and kisses both her cheeks. Ginny turns to Harry, and Hermione tenses, scolding herself for feeling so bloody jealous.

Ginny smiles, and Harry smiles, too. He leans forward and kisses her cheek very quickly. Hermione can feel his lips on her own cheek, and her skin is burning. “Happy birthday, Ginny,” Harry says.

And that’s it.

Nothing else.

There’s no sexual tension, no chemistry, no nothing.

Harry knows it. Ginny knows it.

“Thank you,” she says sweetly, opening the door wider to allow them in. “You can just—well, throw your coats wherever. I have to go tell Mum you’re here—she’ll be so excited to see you!” Ginny grins and spins away from her friends.

Harry takes off his cloak and turns to Hermione. Her arms are folded firmly across her chest, and she's biting her lip. Harry frowns at her, and she laughs. "All right," she sighs, shedding the cloak.

He can't help but stare.

She's wearing the necklace he and Ron gave to her for her twentieth birthday. Actually, Harry had chosen it, from a Muggle store, and Ron had had a witch jewellery store to add a few final touches to the simple glass and pearl necklace.

That feels like a lifetime ago. A lifetime when his thoughts on the jewellery around Hermione's neck weren't associated with the desire to *kiss* that neck.

Harry clears his throat. "Shall we?" He offers his arm out.

Hermione nods, tucking her own into his and squeezing his forearm tightly.

"You look beautiful," Harry adds quietly, looking away and blushing slightly as they walk into the main room.

Ron waves them over, a Firewhiskey clasped in his hand. He studies Hermione. "You look great." He looks over at Harry. "You look great *together*," he says, emphasising the last word and winking at Harry. Hermione, luckily, doesn't catch it, because Mrs Weasley has just hurried up to them. She plants a kiss on Hermione's cheek, then Harry's.

"Oh, you look positively wonderful, Hermione! And you, too, Harry! Oh, this is so exciting! When is the baby due?" But before Hermione can answer the question, others have begun to swarm around them.

"So, Hermione, when is the baby due?"

"Have you popped the question yet, Harry?"

"Oh you look *fantastic*, Hermione, positively wonderful!"

“You’ve got yourself a beautiful girl there, Harry!”

It is exactly what she had anticipated. Not even two minutes, and already they’re being bombarded with questions! But somehow, with Harry’s hand placed firmly on the small of her back, it’s bearable. Terrifying, but bearable.

Harry’s enjoying this, to be honest. He can feel himself swelling with pride, and at the same time, he feels sad. Yes, he has a beautiful girl. A wonderful girl. A girl he’s positive he’d be willing to spend the rest of his life with. But she’s not his. Not really. She’s scared—that’s the only reason she’s staying so close to him.

It’s not fair.

“I’ll be right back, all right?” he says softly into Hermione’s ear. He signals at Ron, who takes his place at Hermione’s side, helping her fend off the eager women surrounding her.

Harry walks out onto the porch. It’s surprisingly warm for the first week in April, with a strong breeze that blows through his hair.

Mr Weasley and a few of his coworkers at the Ministry for Magic are standing around in the grass, a sheer tent surrounding them, blocking the wind.

Lupin sees Harry and walks over, embracing him quickly. “How are you doing?” he asks.

Harry shrugs. “Not too bad. And yourself?”

“I’m all right. It’s been pretty busy, with all the mayhem from catching Bellatrix.” Lupin coughs. “Is Hermione here?”

“Yes. She’s being bombarded with questions about the baby.”

“Ah.”

“Harry!”

Mr Weasley walks over to them. He claps Harry on the back. “How are you doing, m’boy?”

“Great, Mr Weasley, and yourself?”
“Not too bad. It’s strange to think how grown up every one is. Ginny, twenty-one!” He shakes his head. “It’s quite incredible.”

Harry nods, smiling. He can’t help but realise just how lucky they all are to be here. Ginny, the youngest, has reached her twenty-first birthday. It *is* incredible, considering the fact that six years ago, he was terrified she’d make it to her sixteenth.

He smiles a little, unaware that Mr Weasley is still talking to him. Six years ago, thoughts of Ginny filled his mind. And now, when he turns off the light and closes his eyes, all he can see is Hermione.

“Harry?”

He feels a hand on his arm, and looks for the face to go with it.

Hermione.

“Hello Mr Weasley,” Hermione says sweetly. “Remus.”

They smile at her. Harry catches their eyes drifting to her stomach, their grins broadening. Harry can’t help it. He smiles, too.

After dinner, Harry escapes to a quiet part of the house, away from the music and the food and the people, people, people. Maybe Hermione was right. It *is* a little overwhelming.

But he’s never felt more proud in all his life.

He sits down on the sofa. It lets out an audible human-like groan. “Careful with my cushions,” it wheezes.

“Sorry,” Harry says, pulling the small pillow out from underneath him and leaning back, closing his eyes.

All he can see is Hermione. All he can hear is Hermione.

Her tinkling laughter at one of Fred's jokes.

The tentative smile on her face when she caught him looking at her.

The way she boldly stared straight back into his eyes.

"Harry, what are you doing *here*?"

Ginny is standing in the doorway, her head tilted to one side.

"I, uh, it was a bit much for me. Great party, really, but I can only take so many questions about when I'm going to ask Hermione to marry me."

Ginny grins, walking over and sitting down in the chair facing the sofa. "And meanwhile, I'm being asked when I'm going to find the guy who will ask me to marry *him*." She sighs. "It *is* a bit much." She studies Harry. "How have you been, anyway?" she asks.

Harry shrugs. "All right. Busy, but I think that's a good thing. And yourself?"

"Likewise." She pauses.

"So, Ron told me that you and Dean are sort of, kind of ... back together."

Ginny laughs. "Sort of, kind of ... yeah, that's a good way to describe it. I think he's just a wee bit scared of me still, after the first go-round." She smiles. "He makes me happy." "I'm glad."

"What about you?"

"Well, considering the situation ... my love life is nonexistent. It has been since Jane ... and you."

"No, I mean you and Hermione."

Harry swallows. "What about me and Hermione?"

“Oh, Harry. Do you think after all the time I’ve spent with you I can’t read you like a book? You’re in love with her. It’s obvious. You can’t get that look off your face.”

Harry’s given up trying to deny it. If *both* Weasleys know exactly how he feels, is it that obvious to everyone else? “How long have you been in love with her?” Ginny pursues.

Harry smiles, grateful that Ginny hasn’t changed at all since their relationship dissolved. Even while they were dating, there was a sort of brotherly/sisterly connection that didn’t fade when they stopped dating.

“I don’t really know,” he confesses. “It just sort of—happened. Like, one day she was just Hermione, my best friend … and the next, she was something else.” Harry pauses, surprised at how easy it is to talk to Ginny.

She nods thoughtfully. “Well, I can’t say I’m shocked.” “What do you mean?”

“Oh, come on, Harry. People have assumed you two were dating since you became friends—all the witches who read Rita Skeeter’s articles, Malfoy, Krum, Cho, Jane … even me at one point. You just—there’s something about the two of you that seems to make sense.”

“Well, I’m glad everyone else could see it so clearly, but she obviously doesn’t.”

“How do you know that?” Ginny counters. “Have you asked her? Have you tried to tell her since everything happened?” Harry sighs. “No. But—there’s no point. I know she doesn’t.”

He looks up to see a satisfied look on her face.

“What?”

“Oh, nothing,” she says quickly. “But seriously, Harry,” she adds. “Don’t assume anything. Ask her. Surely you two have been friends long enough to be able to be honest with each other.”

Ron sits down next to Hermione in the main room. “A glass of ice water, as requested,” he says, handing her the cup.

“Thanks.” She takes a sip and breathes deeply. Who would have thought a party would take so much work on her part? Standing for long periods of time drains her.

“Not a bad party,” Ron comments, leaning back. “I haven’t seen Ginny in a while, though.”

Hermione shrugs. “She probably exited the scene for a few minutes. There are a lot of your relatives here that she just doesn’t know very well, asking her all kinds of questions.” “Sounds like *your* situation,” Ron replies.

Hermione shrugs. “It’s certainly not as terrible as I thought it would be,” she admits.

“I told you it wouldn’t be!”

“All right, all right. You were right and I was wrong.” Hermione takes another swallow.

“So how are you and Harry?”

“We’re managing.” She shakes her head. “I’m still getting my mind around all of this. It’s very ... well, strange.”

“Are you still denying that you’re in love with him?”

Hermione looks up in surprise. “What are you -”

“Don’t try to hide it, Hermione. I can see it in your eyes, the way you smile at him. You’re in love with him. And I think you’re afraid to tell him, because you’re worried about what will happen to your friendship.”

Hermione opens her mouth to argue, but what’s the point? He’s right. It’s sometimes alarming how dead on Ron can be.

She looks up. Where *is* Harry, anyway?

As if he can read her mind, Harry appears in the doorway ... with Ginny. His eyes lock with hers. Does he look ... guilty? Hermione swallows a lump in her throat. So she was right. There *is* something still there.

"It doesn't matter, anyway," Hermione tells Ron sadly. "Looks like Ginny's got him back."

Ron looks at his sister and Harry. "No, I don't think so," he says, winking at Ginny.

"Go on. Ask her to dance," Ginny mumbles at Harry.

"We aren't teenagers anymore, Ginny. This is ridiculous. What am I supposed to say?"

"You're supposed to ask her if she'd like to dance. It's very simple. You've done it a million times before, I'm sure." She nudges Harry. "Go. Now."

Harry stumbles forward awkwardly. This is awkward. Very, very awkward. And why is Hermione staring at him like that? She looks positively murderous.

He reaches the sofa and gulps down air. "I, er, uh, will you dance with me?" he says, stumbling over his words. He can see Ron grin, and he doesn't care.

"Fine," Hermione says coldly. She struggles to her feet, assisted by her two friends. Harry leads her out to the tent, looking back once at Ginny. She's standing next to Ron, whispering something to him. The band starts up a quiet song, and Harry turns to Hermione.

Tonight is a stark contrast to the one in the bar seven and a half months ago.

Hermione places her hands on his shoulders, keeping her distance, but Harry wraps his arms around her waist, pulling her closer to him.

She stiffens, aware that her stomach is pressed against his. Refusing to look into his eyes, she focuses on his chest.

“Are you having a good time?” Harry asks her softly.

“I guess,” Hermione replies coolly. “Are you?”

“Yes, I suppose.”

“Having fun with Ginny, then?”

Ah. That's what Hermione is thinking about.

“We mainly just talked about you,” he says truthfully. And when Hermione doesn't say anything, he adds, “She's with Dean. We're not back together or anything stupid like that.”

He can feel her relax slightly, and she lets out a sigh. Of relief? He's not sure. He's just not sure.

“I knew that,” Hermione says, slightly embarrassed. She's grateful when Harry doesn't respond by teasing her or telling her she's stupid or anything like that.

Mr and Mrs Weasley are dancing nearby. “You two look *wonderful* together,” Mrs Weasley whispers, smiling broadly.

They both try to smile back. They both look at each other, look away. They stare out at the other couples in the crowd.

Neville and Luna are doing some kind of awkwardly exotic dance, the happy married couple of ten months. George is saying something in Lavender's ear, and she's giggling; they've been dating for a year, much to Ron's chagrin. Ginny and Dean are staring into each other's eyes, both beaming. Mr and Mrs Weasley. Tonks and Lupin. Angelina and Fred. A million other pairs, happy together. They've accepted that they're completely in love.

And Harry and Hermione. Refusing to accept it.

Hermione rests her head on Harry's shoulder, closing her eyes. Her breath is on his neck, warm and gentle, and *he* is finding it difficult to breathe. Those two nights are flashing through his mind. What it felt like to hold her. To kiss her. To be inside of her.

I love you more than you could ever imagine, Hermione Granger.

The words are on the tip of his tongue, but he just can't say them.

His breaths are getting shorter, and she can sense it. His arms are wrapped around her waist, and it feels good. She feels so ... safe. Warm. She doesn't want him to let go, not after the music stops, not after tonight, not for eternity. She can't lose him. She would die of a broken heart.

I love you more than you can possibly know, Harry Potter.

She just can't bring herself to tell him.

Hermione looks up and finds herself staring straight into Harry's eyes. She could say it, couldn't she? Open her mouth and tell him exactly how she feels. But no, she won't do it. She can't.

He can't.

“Nicely done, Ron,” Ginny whispers in her brother’s ear. He’s dancing with Susan Bones, right next to Ginny and Dean.

“It seems to be working,” he says quietly. “Sort of. Kind of.”

“It will work,” she promises. “They’re just being stubborn.”

Hermione insists that they walk back to the house through the silent Diagon Alley, despite the rain beating persistently on their heads. Harry’s not really sure why she wants to walk, but he decides not to question her. And it is kind of nice, actually. Cold, but nice. They don’t say anything to each other, listening to the sound of their feet on the

stones and the rain on the roofs of the shops. They keep looking over at each other and smiling. And neither one knows why the other is doing it.

“That was a fun party,” Hermione finally says, looking down at her feet.

Harry wipes his wet forehead with his wet cloak. Stupid. “Yeah. I enjoyed myself.” He pauses. “And the robe was all right? It wasn’t too tight or anything?”

Hermione shoves him playfully, and they both laugh. “The robe was *fine*, thanks.”

“You looked good in it.” Harry swallows. “You looked beautiful.” His cheeks are burning.

“You looked pretty good yourself.”

They smile at each other, look away. His arm keeps brushing against her shoulder and it’s driving him mad. But she doesn’t seem to notice, or if she does, she doesn’t seem to care. Does she shiver like he does every time any part of his body touches any part of hers? Or is it ... no big deal?

Hermione looks up at the sky. But the answer she’s looking for isn’t written in the stars. Harry alone holds the key. He just doesn’t seem to realise it.

He stops suddenly, and bends down. A red rose is lying on the ground, but it hasn’t been trampled on. It’s as though it just dropped out of the heavens, freshly opened and beautiful. He shows it to Hermione, and then puts it between his teeth.

“That’s disgusting,” she comments, laughing.

“Dance with me,” he says without removing the flower.

“What was that?”

“Dance with me!”

“Here?”

Harry nods, and grabs her waist before she can refuse. He takes her hand and hums as they dance up the street. Hermione laughs and allows herself to be dragged along, humming along with him. He twirls her carefully, and then she twirls him, taking the rose out of his mouth and tucking it into her hair. The stem sticks out, but it doesn't matter. All that matters is that they're together.

Hermione is sitting there on the coach, staring through the window when Harry enters the room. She doesn't notice him. He walks up behind her, placing his hands on her shoulders. She looks up and smiles. "You startled me," she says softly, putting her mug on the table beside her. "Why aren't you sleeping?"

"I just couldn't, I guess."

Hermione nods. "I couldn't either. This one's keeping me awake," she adds, looking down at her stomach.

Harry sits down next to her, looking out into the darkness. "Are your childbirth classes going all right?" he asks.

She nods, taking another sip of her hot chocolate. "They're really helpful. But the baby likes to move around a lot whenever I lie down."

"Can you sleep at all sitting up?"

Hermione shrugs. "I haven't tried. The past few nights, I've just waited until I'm exhausted, and then I sleep despite the movements." She gestures towards the television. "Could you turn on the telly? I wouldn't mind seeing what they have on this late."

Harry takes his wand from his dressing-gown and flicks it at the screen. The bright light from the television blinds them, and the volume is blaring for some reason. He turns the noise down, leaning back against the cushions.

They don't talk after that. What is there to say? She shifts in her seat a few times before settling back next to him. He can smell her shampoo—she must have showered after they got back from the party—and her toenails are painted the same colour as her dress robes had been. She's wearing the dressing-gown the Weasleys gave her for her birthday three years ago, and she hasn't taken off the necklace. And he hates himself for noticing all of this, because these aren't the things a friend should be paying attention to.

After a while, she yawns. Her head falls on his shoulder. He can feel her breath on his neck. He kisses the top of her head ever so lightly and takes her limp hand in his own, lacing their fingers together. "I

love you, Hermione Granger," he says, almost inaudibly. He knows she can't hear him, but it doesn't matter at this point. Just saying it to the silence that surrounds them is enough.

She stirs a few minutes later. "Do you want to go to bed?" Harry asks her. He starts to move, but she clings to him.

"Stay here," she murmurs. "Please."

Harry moves himself slowly, so that her head is on his chest. He leans his back against the edge of the couch and closes his eyes.

And they breathe.

When Harry wakes up, he finds himself and Hermione in an entirely different position. Hermione is lying on her back, and Harry is lying sideways, his body pressed against hers. One arm is cradling Hermione's head, and the other is lying across her stomach. His hand is locked with hers, moving up and down on her belly. He watches in fascination. *This is our baby.* It's still hard to grasp. But it's wicked.

He settles his head back on the cushions, Hermione's hair has fanned out across the couch, and he carefully moves it from underneath him. He closes his eyes, drifting back into sleep.

Hermione wakes, blinking several times. She can feel his warm breath on her skin, and she shivers. His hand is clasping hers tightly on top of her belly, and she doesn't want him to ever, ever let it go. She slowly turns her head. Her nose brushes his, and his eyes open quickly. "Good morning," she says quietly.

"Good morning," Harry says, yawning. And they just look at each other, smiling. For a moment, everything is simple and uncomplicated. They are Hermione and Harry. A boy and a girl.

There have been many stories written with just this.

For a flickering moment, they get a look into the future. The baby crawling on the floor while Hermione makes dinner. Harry enters the house, takes off his cloak, and walks into the kitchen. He picks up the baby and wraps his free arm around Hermione's waist, kissing her neck.

This is how it should be.

"How did you sleep?" Harry asks.

Hermione shrugs. "Better than I have in a while," she says. "I think it's the couch."

Oh, so it's not the fact that the guy you're in love with is lying next to you, is it?

"You're going to see your mum today, aren't you?"

Hermione nods, closing her eyes again. "I should get up."

Harry shakes his head. "No, go back to sleep for a little."

"But I need to eat breakfast, and -"

Harry carefully steps over her onto the floor. "I'll make you breakfast, all right? I'll wake you up when it's ready."

Hermione feels tears well up in her eyes as she watches him leave the room. Why does he have to be so damn wonderful? It's not fair. It would be so much easier if he was the biggest wally she'd ever met. It would be easy if she could hate him. But she can't. She just can't.

"Right. I'm off," Hermione tells Harry, winding a scarf around her neck. She looks over his shoulder at the *Daily Prophet*. Nothing interesting.

"Make sure you give those flowers to your mum for me," he reminds her, looking up from the article he's been reading.

Hermione smiles. "I won't forget," she promises. "They're beautiful. She'll love them, I'm sure."

“I hope she does.”

Hermione studies Harry’s face. His cheeks are the same colour as his lips and his hair is as messy as it’s always been. And his eyes are glowing. Can he read her mind?

She tucks her hair behind her ear, looking away. “I’ll see you when I get back, all right?”

Harry stands up slowly. She can feel the heat emanating from his body, but she just can’t look into his eyes.

Slowly, carefully, he moves his face closer, kissing her forehead lightly. Hermione shivers in spite of herself. “Be careful,” Harry says quietly.

Hermione nods, taking a step back. “I’ll be fine, Harry,” she says, taking out her wand and picking up the flowers. “I’ll see you in a bit.”

Mrs Granger settles herself on the chair facing her daughter. “So how are you feeling, darling?”

“Right now, I’m all right. I had a few back pains earlier, but other than that.”

“And is the baby moving a lot?”

“Sometimes yes, sometimes no.”

“And have you been taken birth classes regularly?”

“I have.”

“And -”

“Mum, could we stop with the questions, please?” Hermione rubs her forehead. “I got enough last night at my friend’s birthday party.”

“Sorry, love. We’re just so excited about all of this.” Mrs Granger sips her tea. “I don’t think I’ve seen your father this eager since *your* birth.”

She shakes her head. “You know, when I went in to labour, you refused to come out unless I was standing.”

“What?”

“Any time I lay down, you would stop moving. So I walked almost the entire six hours of labour.”

“You never told me that!”

“Hadn’t I?” Mrs Granger laughs. “You were stubborn from the beginning.”

“Oh thanks, mum.”

“I mean that in a good way, love.” She sets her cup down. “Now, I have one request,” she says.

“Oh? What’s that?”

“I want you to look me in the eyes and tell me you’re not in love with Harry Potter.”

“What?” Hermione asks, startled. Of all the people ...

Mrs Granger cackles, positively delighted. “Come on, darling. Surely you didn’t think you could hide it from *me*?”

“Mum -” Hermione starts, trying to keep her voice calm and steady.

“Oh, are you going to actually try it?” her mother teases. “Go on, then.”

“Mum, stop it! I’m so sick of this! I’m under enough stress as it is, and the last thing I need is you, or any of my friends, or ... well, anyone at *all*, telling me how much I’m in love with Harry Potter, Ok? I already know it, thank you!”

“Oh, Hermione, I’m sorry. I was only joking. I didn’t mean to make you angry.”

Hermione breathes deeply. It’s the first time she’s admitted aloud to someone that she’s in love with him, and guess what? It feels good.

But at the same time, it feels bloody terrible.

She rests her hands on her stomach. "I don't really know what to do," she says quietly.

"Of course you do." Mrs Granger leans forward. "You tell him the truth."

"But what if he doesn't feel -"

"You're making it too complicated. You tell him because it's how you feel and it's the truth, not because you're positive that he's going to tell you the same thing. If that was how all couples started, the world would be a pretty pathetic place."

"But mum, it's Harry."

"I know, I know. But I also know how much it's hurting you to hide this from him. Just tell Harry how you feel." Her mother coughs. "Now, do you want to use your old cradle or not?"

Hermione had hoped to feel *less* burdened by the time she left her parents' house, not *more*. But on top of all of her original feelings are her mothers' thoughts and profound statements, and her mother's voice in inside of her head, repeating the same words over and over. *Just tell Harry how you feel.*

It may not be as complicated as I make it, but it's certainly not as simple as mum makes it, Hermione thinks sadly, slowly starting to climb the stairs up to the apartment.

"Hermione!"

She looks up. Harry's darting down the stairs. "Let me help you," he says, taking her arm. "Why didn't you take the lift?"

"I, erm, didn't feel like it, I guess," she says, refusing to look at him. How can she? "It's only twenty stairs. Not a problem."

“Careful, careful.” Harry clears his throat. “How was your mum?”

Fine. She just told me to tell you I’m in love with you. “She was fine. She loved the flowers.” Hermione smiles, beginning to breathe heavily. “That was really sweet of you, Harry.”

“Oh, I know. I’m just the sweetest chap around. Obviously.”

They reach the top stair, Hermione panting, clutching Harry’s arm with one hand and the banister with the other.

Harry unlocks the door. “Can I get you anything? A cup of tea? Toast?”

“I’m all right for now,” Hermione says, wiping her sweaty forehead. “Ugh. I’m a total mess, though. Disgusting.”

“No, you look fine.” *You look beautiful.*

“I’m going to go—take a shower. Maybe then I’ll be hungry.” Hermione looks up at last into Harry’s eyes. “Thanks for—for helping me with those stairs.”

Harry stares right back. Goosebumps appear on her arms, and she doesn’t know how they got there. “No problem,” he says with a smile.

She wants to look away, but she’s transfixed. She always knew his eyes were beautiful, but were they always *this* green, *this* intense? It’s almost too much for her, but she doesn’t care. She could be burned to death by those green eyes and she would be dying a happy person.

The baby kicks, and Hermione winces a little.

“What’s wrong?” Harry asks, moving towards her.

“It’s just the baby. Moving around.” She looks back at Harry, and she sees longing in his eyes. It’s probably the cutest thing she’s ever seen. “Do you want to—do you want to hear?”

Harry nods. He can't find his voice. Slowly, he kneels in front of Hermione, pressing his ear to her stomach. There is silence for a few seconds, and then Harry lets out a little gasp.

"Is that really -"

"Yeah."

"This is—this is *cool!*"

Hermione smiles. She hadn't expected Harry to get so excited about something like this.

Harry keeps the side of his head pressed to her stomach for a few more minutes, and then he looks up. "I bet this is all old news for you, right?"

"Yeah, I guess." Hermione laughs. "I'm glad you think it's so cool."

"It's beyond cool," Harry says, laughing too. "I must look like a right idiot."

"No, no. It's sweet."

Harry stays on his knees for a little longer, but then he realises how similar it is to another pose and he gets up. And now, he's at a loss for words. "Well," he finally says, clearing his throat. "I'll—make dinner, shall I?"

"Sure," Hermione says slowly. "And I'll—I'll take a shower, then."

"Right."

"Right."

"Ok then."

"Ok."

Their eyes meet again, but they both look away.

"Ok then," Harry says again, taking a few steps backwards.

“Right,” Hermione replies, backing away from him.

Harry furrows his brow as he flips through the book. *If Hermione's even considering naming the baby Jerrell or Jolene, I'll ...*

"Harry? What are you doing?" Hermione asks as she walks slowly into the room, clutching the counter.

Harry looks up. "Just looking through this Baby Names book brought over earlier," he answers. "There are some pretty ridiculous names in here, you know."

Hermione sits down heavily. "I know. Did you look through the W section? There are some pretty terrible ones there. Wilona and Wilmet were my favourites ..."

"What about Bede?"

"Ok, that's pretty bloody awful."

"I'm not very good at this." He pauses, wrinkling his nose. "You know, we could just name the baby, well, Baby."

"That would only work if it was a girl."

"I don't know *what* you're talking about. Baby is a *very* masculine name, Hermione," Harry jokes.

"If you're seriously considering Baby, I will wring your neck. Girl or boy, I could never name my child that."

"I'm, only *joking*. All right. I'm being serious now." Harry flips towards the front of the book. "What do you think of -" He pauses. "Chelsea?"

Hermione shrugs. "It's pretty."

"But you don't love it?"

"Not really."

"All right. Erm, Chastity?"

"No, no, no."

“Hang on.” Harry flips back towards the end. “Page?”

Hermione thinks. “I like it. What do you think?”

“It’s an idea.” He folds the page over. “Right. Do you want to keep looking at girls names and then go to boys?”

Hermione nods, not telling Harry how she really feels. *I already know what I want to name him if we have a boy*, she thinks.

“Hermione?”

She blinks. “Sorry, what?”

“Robin?”

Hermione shakes her head, watching Harry flip through the book.

“Waverly?”

Hermione bites her lip and smiles. “Waverly,” she repeats. “Waverly.”

“Do you like it?”

“Yeah, I do.” Harry smiles. “Waverly.”

Hermione grins back at him. “I’m glad you like it.”

“So, do you want to keep looking through the girls?”

Hermione shakes her head. “I like Waverly.”

“Then we’ll go on to the boys.”

But I’ve already decided, she thinks, biting her lip again.

No, she can’t tell him. And if it isn’t a boy—well, then it won’t matter.

“Edmund?”

Hermione shakes her head.

“Nigel? Ned?”

“No.”

“Parker?”

“No.”

“Scott?”

“No.”

“How about -”

The doorbell rings. Hermione lets out a deep breath.

“I guess we’ll choose later, right?” Harry says, closing the book.

“Right,” Hermione agrees. *But I already know.*

Harry stands up, hurrying to the door.

“Heya,” Ron calls to Hermione as he walks into the house. He claps Harry on

the shoulder, walking to Hermione and kissing our forehead. He spots the book on the table. “Ah, baby names. I suggest the name Ronald, if it’s a boy. Did you know it means ‘Advisor to the King’?”

“No thanks, Ron,” Harry says, laughing. “It works great for you but -”

“Oh, I’m so insulted!” Ron cries out, clutching his chest. “But seriously, any good ideas.”

Harry smiles at Hermione. “We were thinking Waverly, if it’s a girl.”

“Waverly,” Ron says thoughtfully. “I like it. And if it’s a boy?”

“We haven’t decided yet,” Harry says slowly. “Hermione didn’t like any of the names I suggested.”

“Well, I could help you,” Ron offers. Hermione shoots him a glance, and he reads her mind. “But I think that should be left between the two of you,” he adds quickly. “Lunch?”

“Definitely,” Harry says. “I’m starving. I’ll just grab our jackets, all right?”

As soon as he’s out of earshot, Hermione hisses at Ron, “I swear, Ronald, if you tell him -”

“I won’t, Hermione.” Ron grins. “It’s all right! Your secret is safe with me. I promise.” He frowns. “But Hermione, if it’s not a boy … will you tell him?”

Hermione shakes her head. “It’s just an idea.”

“You two ready?”

Hermione nods, and Ron helps her to her feet. Harry can’t help but smile as she walks carefully down the small flight of stairs. Even with an enormous stomach, she’s beautiful. He never thought she was ugly, but he never felt his heart drop to his feet when he looked at her before. And that’s what happens now. Every single time he looks at her.

“Harry? You all right?” Hermione touches his arm.

Harry smiles.

You are beautiful.

“I’m fine.” He nods at Ron. “Let’s go.”

Hermione's mobile phone beeps loudly and obnoxiously. She opens her eyes, groaning. *What could her mother want at three in the bloody morning?* The only reason she bought the mobile was because her mother insisted that she just couldn't get used to the idea of an owl flying in and out of her house whenever she wanted to contact her daughter. So far, Mrs Granger is the only person who calls Hermione.

She sits up carefully, reaching for the phone. "Mum? Hello? What is it?" she asks tiredly. "Why are you calling so early?"

There is a crackling noise from the other end.

"Mum? Are you there?"

"Hermione—heart attack—hospital -"

Hermione's blood goes cold. Harry stumbles into the room. "Everything Ok?" he mouths. Hermione can't speak. She can't move.

"Hermione, can you hear me?" her mother's voice says shakily. "Your father had a heart attack. The ambulance just came to take him to St Thomas's."

Hermione finds her voice again. "All right, mum," she says numbly. "I'll be there soon, Ok? Bye." She clicks off and stares at the phone disbelievingly. No. This can't be happening. Heart attacks happen all the time to millions of people all over the world, yes, but not her father, anyone but him—

"Hermione?"

Harry's voice brings her back down to earth. She stands up slowly, sits back down, and stands up again, clutching the bedpost. "Harry, I -" Tears well up in her eyes. *Anyone but my father ...*

He walks slowly towards her, and she collapses into his arms, weeping. "It's my father, he—he had a heart attack, and—and they're at the hospital now, and—oh, Harry, I can't lose him, not here, not now -"

“Which hospital?” Harry asks, holding her tightly against him.

“St-St Thomas’s,” Hermione says between sobs. “Oh Harry, I can’t lose him, I just can’t. He means everything.”

“I’m going with you.”

“W-what?” Hermione pulls away. “Harry, *no*, you’ve got that enormous presentation with Seamus today -”

“I’ll call him to let him know if I can’t make it on time. But I’m going with you.”

“Harry -”

“Hermione, I’m coming with you.” He cups her face in his hands, wiping her cheeks with his thumbs. “I’m coming with you,” he repeats.

She nods slowly.

Anyone but him ...

Harry rubs his eyes, staring blearily at the white walls in the waiting room of the hospital. He nervously sips the coffee the nurse brought him a little while ago. It’s lukewarm and tastes *foul*, and he spits it back into the cup. Disgusting.

He hates Muggle hospitals. They’re so ... *white*. White chairs, white carpets, white outfits worn by doctors and nurses, white beds, white –

“Harry?”

He jerks his head up. Hermione is standing in front of him, her hands clenched into fists at her sides.

“Is he all right?” he asks, standing up.

Hermione nods, biting her lip. “They told us he’d be fine,” she says, sitting down slowly. She looks up at the clock. “This is ridiculous. Go home. You need sleep.”

“So do you,” he replies, sitting down again.

“But he’s not *your* father, and -” Hermione cuts herself off quickly.
“God, I didn’t mean it to sound like that, I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“I just—I don’t want to burden you.” She pauses. “You don’t need this, especially from me. I must sound so pathetic to you, absolutely pathetic.”

“It’s not a burden, Hermione,” Harry insists. “Honest. I would *tell* you if I didn’t want to be here. But I do.”

Hermione sighs. “There’s so many tests he has to—to go through,” she says quietly. “I wonder what they do with all of them.”

Harry murmurs in agreement.

“And they never really tell you *why* they need to give him these tests,” she continues. “It’s like—it’s like they think you won’t understand, so they don’t even *try* to explain. I mean,” she says, getting angrier. “I don’t even know why we’re here. What good is it, anyway? Can they really do anything to save him? I mean, sure, they’ll be able to help him for a little while, but he’s going to die in the end, from his stupid *heart*, and there’s nothing anybody can do about it.” She closes her eyes. “It goes on and on, and I feel like I’m stuck here, helpless, like I can’t do anything about … about any of this, and it sucks. I’m just so helpless. We all are.”

“But you’re strong -”

Hermione’s eyes open, and she stares straight into Harry’s eyes. “I’m *not* strong. I wish I were, but I’m not. I can’t do anything about this. There’s nothing for me to do.” She blinks. “Nothing,” she repeats quietly.

They sit in silence for a few moments.

“It’s losing him that I’m scared of. I can’t stand thinking about letting him go.”

Harry swallows slowly. "I can't pretend I know exactly what this is like," he says softly. He sees a flash of green light, hears a high-pitched scream. "But I do believe that if you truly love another person, the way I know you love your father, you can never leave them. Not really. And they can never leave you."

Hermione looks up into his eyes, his green eyes. "Do you love someone like that?" she asks in practically a whisper.

Harry stares straight back. "Yes," he says, his voice cracking. "I do."

"Have you ever let them know?"

Harry hesitates. "I think I have. I hope so."

"Excuse me, Miss Granger?"

They both look up. A nurse is standing in front of them, holding a clipboard under her arm. "Your father would like to see you," the nurse says quietly.

Hermione nods, standing up. She looks back once at Harry, who gives her a small smile.

I love you. Do you know that?

When Hermione walks into the room, her stomach drops down to her feet and then slams into her throat. Her father looks dead. His eyes are closed, his hands clasped over his chest. His cheeks are pale and he doesn't look like he's breathing.

But his eyes open a moment later, and a smile spreads across his face. "Hermione," he says weakly.

She wills her tears not to flow down her face. "Hiya, daddy," she says quietly, walking forward. "How are you feeling?"

He clears his throat. “Bloody *terrible*,” he says. “I hate when they stick all of those needles in your arms and stuff—*disgusting*—but I’m feeling better than before.” He pauses. “I’m glad you’re here.”

“Me too, daddy.” She touches his hand gently.

“I’m going to be fine, Hermione.”

“For now,” she says before she can stop herself.

“Yes, for now, I’ll be fine. For now and for a long time.”

“But dad -”

“I know what you’re thinking, Hermione. I can see it in your eyes. And I promise you, you won’t be losing me—not yet. You’re stuck with me for a little longer.” He coughs. “I’m not going to let my heart get the better of me. I’d like to see my grandchild walk, thank you very much.”

Hermione smiles as a tear falls from her face. “Oh, daddy -”

“You know what I saw, just before I came to? Before I found myself *here*, with the doctors faces looming over me?”

“What did you see?”

He smiles. “I saw me, walking you down the aisle,” he says softly. “I lifted the veil and I kissed your cheeks, and I watched you turn towards your future husband, and I knew it was the right thing to do. I knew, without any doubt, that Ha—that *he* was the one you were meant to be with.” He pauses. “You looked beautiful.” He smiles. “Of course, you don’t need to wear a wedding dress to prove that.” He holds her hand weakly in his, and she sees tears glistening in his eyes. “You’re my little angel.”

Hermione presses her lips to her father’s hand, her tears falling onto his wrinkled skin.

Mr Granger strokes her hair. “My angel.”

Hermione is sitting at the kitchen table, staring straight ahead. One hand is on her stomach, and her brow is furrowed. She left her father sleeping a couple of hours ago, and returned to the apartment with her thoughts tumbling around like a washing machine.

She's not an idiot. She heard him almost say his name. Harry. Harry, Harry, Harry. *How*, she wonders. *Does everyone know, but we never talk about it?*

She wishes she could go back and ask her dad if he is *positive* that Harry is the one. She wants to know why she couldn't have grabbed him and kissed him when she had the chance—say, first or second year at Hogwarts? Even *third* year, for pity's sake! How different would things be? Would they already have a family started? Would he be popping the question tonight at dinner? Or would a kiss from his best friend at twelve years old been painfully awkward and ruined the entire relationship?

Hermione presses her forehead onto the table.

More than anything, she wants to know if he feels the same way. She wants to know if he ever thinks about her, while he's curled up in his bed, separated from her by a wall. She wants to know—

The front door slams shut. "I'm back, Hermione!" Harry's voice calls from the hallway. But Hermione doesn't even really register that's he's home. Her head is still on the table, and her heart is still aching more than she would've thought possible eight and a half months ago.

Harry lifts her shoulders carefully, settling her back against the chair. "Are you tired? Do you want to go to bed?"

"No, no," she says, sighing deeply. "I was just thinking."

"Anything you want to talk about?"

The fact that I'm completely in love with you.

"No," she says quietly.

"All right," he says after a few moments. "I'll get dinner ready, all right? You just stay here." After another couple of seconds, he kisses the top of her head and steps away, heading towards the fridge.

Hermione turns to face him. "So did you make it in time for the presentation?"

Harry takes out the pork chops he bought yesterday and nods. "Yes, I did, with about thirty seconds to spare. But I think it went pretty well."

"That's good."

And then there's silence. Not the awkward silence that plagues most people on their first dates. Because Hermione and Harry have never *had* a first date. It's the silence of two people who are trying desperately to sort through their own thoughts, knowing that the other person is doing the same thing. It's the silence they know can be broken if it really needs to be, but right now, it just doesn't.

It's a silence that gives them both peace.

Hermione wipes her mouth with her napkin. "Thank you, Harry," she says. "That was a pretty elaborate meal."

"It actually wasn't that hard. Did you like it?"

"Yeah. It was great."

Hermione stands up and carries her plate to the kitchen sink. Harry follows her, and she takes his plate as well. She taps her wand on each, and they clean themselves within seconds. She reaches up to open the cabinet, but Harry shakes his head, opening the cabinet and putting the plates away. "You don't need to strain yourself, you know."

"Thanks, Harry." Hermione smiles.

Suddenly, her body twitches.

"Hermione?"

“I don’t know what that was, I -” She does it again.

“Is something wrong?” Harry grins. “Do you have, like, a nervous tick or something?”

“No,” Hermione says, as she twitches again. She laughs. “Harry, I think the baby is *hiccoughing*.”

“Are you serious? You can feel it hiccough?”

“Well of course I can, you dolt. It’s attached to me.”

Harry puts his hand to her stomach as it flinches. “Oh my gosh,” he murmurs.

Hermione giggles. “The baby’s done it a few times before, but never this much!”

“I must have put something strange in the dinner.”

“No, I think I just ate it to fast for him.”

Harry looks up at Hermione’s face, and they smile at each other. Slowly, carefully, she moves her hand so that it’s touching his hand, just barely. But he can sense it, can feel goose bumps run up and down his arms and the hair on the back of his head prick up. Does she have any idea that a single touch from her is enough to make it impossible for him to breathe?

Boldly, he moves a few fingers over hers.

His cheeks are the same colour as his lips, and she wants to run her fingers through his unruly hair. She brushes it away from his scar, her fingers hesitating over the mark. He reaches out slowly, tucking her messy hair behind her ear.

He should pull away, before he does something stupid like kiss her.

But then she leans forward and presses her lips to his, and his mind shuts down completely. He cups her face in his hands and pulls it as

close to his as he can. He kisses her carefully, but she kisses him back fiercely, gripping his hair gently but firmly in her hands.

The baby kicks, *hard*, and Hermione almost gasps. What the bloody hell is she *doing*?

And that's when he notices that she's crying.

And then she's pulling away, letting out a little whimper as she backs up. "I'm so sorry, Harry, I just—I must be all over the place, with my—with my dad and everything, I didn't meant to do that, and —"

"Hermione —" he tries to begin. He can barely get his words out. Does this mean she feels the same way? Was everyone else right? He wants to kiss her again. His lips are begging to touch hers. He wants her hands in his hair, her legs wrapped around him, her body close to his.

"I'm sorry, Harry, but I just—God, I don't know what came over me, I'm so bloody pathetic—I'm going to bed."

"No, Hermione —"

But she's not listening. She is walking backwards, her eyes wide as she stares into his, and she won't let him finish his sentence. "I'm sorry, Harry. Forget it ever happened. I was just being stupid. Good night."

He hears her door slam, and he slaps his hand on the counter. God, he's stupid. Stupid, stupid, stupid. He took advantage of her while she was vulnerable, didn't he? Stupid. How could he have done something like that?

But she kissed him first. Was it really because she wasn't really thinking, because her mind was on her dad and not him? It didn't feel like that. It felt like a kiss that had been bottled up for eight and a half months, and she tasted better than he had remembered and—

He can't do this. He wills his mind to stop racing.

She's not his to have.

Hermione paces around her room in circles, hands on her stomach and tears on her cheeks.

There is a wall that divides them. Just feet away, Harry is lying. Is he sleeping, or is he awake, too? Is it time for her to tear down that wall and force him to accept their bond?

She sits down on a chair, closing her eyes. She wishes she could fall asleep, rid herself of these memories that keep flashing before her eyes, the voices in her ears.

Harry – you're a great wizard, you know.

The troll.

Are you going to report me?

Harry conjuring the Polyjuice Potion.

I know it is, Harry, so will you please stop biting my head off?

The portrait of Sirius's mother.

Expecto Patronum! Hermione, help me! Expecto Patronum!

The chessboard.

Well, I was lucky once, wasn't I? I might get lucky again.

Fighting in the Ministry of Magic

Hermione – I need you to help me.

Meeting Sirius in Hogsmeade

Hermione, we know Millicent Bulstrode's ugly, no one's going to know it's you.

The Time-Turner.

But you'll notice I decided to engrave the date on bits of metal rather than on our members' skin.

The final battle.

The words he had said to her, as the three of them had waited for Voldemort and his cronies to arrive. Ron had been spacing out, staring out at the horizon from the rubble of the house.

“It’s not dying that I’m afraid of,” he had said as the wind began to pick up and the clouds spread across the sky, “but rather the idea of not taking him with me.” He had hesitated, studying the back of Ron’s head and then looking into Hermione’s eyes. “And I’m scared of leaving you.”

“You’re not going to leave us, Harry.”
“But if I do—you know I love you both, don’t you? I never really said it, but I do. Honest.”
She had squeezed his hand tightly. “I love you, too, Harry,” she had said softly.

It’s amazing to her how those three simple words can take on such a completely different meaning. Hermione shakes her head.

One last memory comes to mind.

And it might have been a good idea to mention how ugly you think I am, too.

But I don’t think you’re ugly.

He may have felt that way so many years ago, but how did he feel about her *now*? Does he think she’s ... beautiful?

Hermione gets up again. She walks into her closet, turning on the light. She pulls a green Muggle sweater from one of the hangers. A sweater she had stolen from Harry a few years ago. She smells it. It smells more like her and less like him. She wants to give it back to him and tell him to wear it for a few months and then steal it again.

She pulls it over her head. The sweater is well worn, soft against her skin. True, it’s a bit too warm for the beginning of May, but it doesn’t really matter.

She sits back down on the chair.

She kissed Harry.

She feels goose bumps rise on her arms.

She kissed Harry.

And she pulled away.

"Idiot," she whispers to herself. It was stupid of her to tell him that she did it because her mind was on her father. It *had* been on her father, but more on what he had said to her.

I saw me, walking you down the aisle. I lifted the veil and I kissed your cheeks, and I watched you turn towards your future husband, and I knew it was the right thing to do. I knew, without any doubt, that Ha—that he was the one you were meant to be with.

And just before she had kissed Harry, she had gotten a very clear image of her father, kissing her cheek, and she had watched herself turn towards him, wearing a white dress and carrying a bouquet of Calla Lilies.

And then she had kissed him, and she had forgotten about thinking. All she could think about was the warmth of his lips, the gentle way he held her head, the—

"Stop it," she says aloud. What good is it? She's just putting herself through more pain. Why, *why* did she pull away?

She knows the answer. It's because she was scared of what would come next. What if Harry didn't mean anything by it? What if he was kissing her back out of pity?

She was scared.

Scared of the future.

Scared of being hurt.

Scared of the truth.

She touches her stomach again.

Who would've thought something that didn't even weight eight pounds could have such an impact?

Harry splashes water on his face, breathing heavily. He didn't sleep last night. He studies the bags under his eyes. He looks bloody terrible. And he knows she didn't sleep last night either. He could hear her moving around in the room, walking in circles. He even heard her talking to herself. She can blame it on her thoughts about the baby, or the size of her belly, or the pelvic pressure from the baby's engagement, but he knows it's more than that. He has to believe that, at some point last night, she was thinking about him. Wasn't she? Wasn't she?

He pads down the hallway. He can see her feet by the doorway, and he hesitates. Her face is pressed to the door, her heart beating so fast. She can barely breathe, but he doesn't know that. She steps away after a few moments, and he keeps walking towards the kitchen. He studies the sink. Last night, he kissed Hermione. Well, technically *she* had kissed *him*. And it felt just as good as it had the other times. This isn't a hoax. He hasn't gone mental. There was something there. He glances at the wall. And *there*. He remembers lifting her up and pressing her against it as she wrapped her legs around him. He can see the couch. And *there*. He looks back towards his room. The bed. *I think I'm in love with you, Hermione Granger.* And *there*.

He opens the refrigerator door, suddenly ravenous. He pulls out the marmalade, the bread, eggs, tomatoes ...

“Good morning,” a quiet voice says.

Harry slams the door to find Hermione standing behind it. He glares at her for a moment before turning away. He gets out the frying pan and cracks three eggs into the pan.

“Harry -”

“Good morning,” he says abruptly. He refuses to look at her. He doesn’t know why he’s so angry with her. Maybe it’s just that he’s angry with himself. For not telling her sooner. For letting it come to this. Stupid, stupid, stupid. But he’s frustrated with her, too, for not accepting it—for not admitting that she knows that they can’t do this without each other. He can tell she’s going to just play innocent, and that’s pathetic, and it hurts him, because it means that maybe the kiss didn’t affect her as much as he knows it has affected him. Or is it that she just doesn’t care at all? Maybe she was telling the truth. Maybe she kissed him simply because she was under a lot of emotional stress and—no. He knows that isn’t true. He has to believe that what he felt, from the way she kissed him, how tightly she clung to him, that there was something more than emotional baggage. He watches the eggs cook over the high heat. He’s sure they’ll burn soon, but it doesn’t matter. He’ll shove them down anyway, because he’s hungry. He’s hungry for food and Hermione—and, since he doubts that he’ll ever get Hermione, because she’s pushing away from him, he’ll stick with the food, whether it’s burnt or not. And all of these thoughts are flying through his head, and he knows they don’t make any sense *at all* and he just doesn’t care. He touches his wand to four slices of bread, and it turns into toast. He spreads the marmalade onto it, tossing it onto a plate. He can feel her eyes on him but he forces himself not to look at her.

Hermione finally sits down at the kitchen table, resting her face in her hands. She knows how angry Harry is with her. And he should be. She knows she deserves it. But does he have to make it so bloody difficult for her?

Hermione winces as pain shoots through her body. It’s been getting steadily worse since yesterday night. Braxton Hicks contractions or whatever Harry called them.

She saw how tired he looked when he shut the refrigerator door. Does that mean he had spent the whole night pacing like she had? Waiting ... waiting ...

Stop it.

Hermione wills herself to stop thinking about all this. She just can't do it. It hurts too much, this waiting in agony. She can't allow herself to become vulnerable—not now.

The baby kicks gently.

Harry carries his plate over to the table, sitting at the opposite end. "Are you hungry?" he asks, his fork hesitating over the food.

He's asking his bloody eggs if they're hungry, because he's still refusing to look at Hermione.

"Not yet," she finally says, waiting for him to raise his head, just once.

But he doesn't. He digs into his food. And she just watches him. She wants to tell him everything. But how can she do that when he won't even talk to her?

Harry finishes his meal in a matter of minutes. He stands up and carries his plates to the sink.

"How—how did you sleep?" she finally asks, leaning back in her chair.

Harry puts his plates down. "Don't," he says quietly, keeping his back to her.

"Don't what?" Hermione winces again.

"Don't—don't pretend nothing happened last night. Don't act like everything is terrific and don't pretend this is the most awkward we've ever been together."

"Harry -"

"And don't tell me you're sorry about last night," Harry says, turning around. "Because I'm not, and I know if you were telling the truth, you'd admit that you don't regret it either."

"Harry, I wasn't really thinking, and -"

"So that's it then, is it? You can't just chalk this up as flawed judgement, Hermione!"

Hermione stands up. "What is there to do, Harry? I can't—we can't—it's just ... we can't do this. You know that."

"What are you so afraid of, Hermione?"

Hermione clutches her stomach as a searing pain explodes through her body. "I'm not scared, Harry. There's nothing here for me to be scared of."

"If you weren't scared, you wouldn't have pulled away."

"What, so you think just one kiss will solve everything, do you? It's not that easy."

"And it doesn't have to be this complicated, either. You've always done this."

"I've always done what? Thought things through? I'm not like you, Harry. I can't just dive right in all the time. My cautious approach has saved *your ass* several times. I am pregnant, and you know what? I think it's Ok if I handle things *your way*."

"Why are you acting like this? I hate it!"

"I don't care if you don't like it, Harry! All right? In case you've forgotten, I'm bloody *pregnant* from just 'letting things happen'!"

Harry studies the tears on her face, the defiant glare, and he says it, without even thinking. "I love you."

Hermione takes a step back. "W-what?"

"I love you," he repeats.

"Oh, Harry -"

Hermione lets out a yelp.

"Hermione? What is it?"

She collapses into the chair.

“Hermione?”

“Harry, I—I think -”

“Hermione, what’s going on? Are you all right?”

“Harry, I think I’m going into labour.”

A/N: I know you’re all ready to kill me at this point. But—I just couldn’t do this any other way. I’m sorry. Forgive me. And stay on the edges of your seats for just a little while longer

Everything happens so fast. Harry's not even sure how he got them to St Mungo's. It's like he's in a daze, and he finds himself standing next to Hermione, holding her hand and coaching her, just like they told him to in all those Muggle birth classes they had gone to.

"Breathe, Hermione. Do you hear me? Just breathe."

Hermione squeezes Harry's hand tightly. Her matted hair is glued to her sweaty forehead, and she's gasping in pain.

"Breathe," Harry repeats softly.

Hermione lets out one final scream, and everything blurs together, and her screams mix with those of the baby's.

"It's a boy!"

A boy.

"He's healthy," one of the nurses says. "He's a good weight, even though he's premature."

Hermione breathes in short spurts, as though she's trying to get in as much air as she can as quickly as possible. She won't let go of Harry's hand until they give her the baby. She grips it tightly, for what feels like an eternity ... and suddenly, a nurse is carefully putting a small bundle into Hermione's arms. They gaze down at the child. Their child. Harry feels tears in his eyes and he brushes them away roughly. A pair of green eyes stare straight back at him, a small fist tightly holding strands of Hermione's curly, sweaty hair.

A boy.

"He's beautiful," Hermione says softly, touching his nose with her finger. It has the same aristocratic tilt to it as hers.

"He's beautiful," Harry echoes. The baby blinks several times and begins to cry again.

“Shh, shh,” Hermione coos, rocking back and forth gently. The baby quiets down a little, still whimpering. It continues to hold on to Hermione’s hair, clutching her hospital gown in its other hand.

Harry gently touches the baby’s cheek with a single finger. “Hiya, stranger,” he says, smiling. The baby studies him, wide-eyed. Harry looks at Hermione, looking down at their child. She’s humming quietly, almost inaudibly, still rocking just slightly.

“It’s amazing, isn’t it?” she says, though she doesn’t really seem to realise she’s talking.

They both seem to forget about the other people in the room. The three of them are huddled together … a family.

Harry nods, his eyes fixed on the baby. Suddenly, the baby smiles, letting go of Hermione’s gown and reaching his fingers upward, towards the ceiling. Harry carefully puts out his first finger, and the baby seizes it, focusing his eyes on Harry’s fingernail.

“He’s pretty cute,” Hermione says, and giggles a little. “He looks like those pictures of you when you were a baby.”

“He looks kind of like you, too,” Harry says. “The nose and the chin—I bet the teeth will be just as big as yours were,” he teases.

“That’s horrible!” Hermione protests. “My teeth were never *that* bad!”

“Oh, but remember when Malfoy hit you with that—that spell, and your teeth were so long -”

“Yes, but I got them fixed after that, and they’re *fine* now,” Hermione says defensively, but she’s smiling. The baby’s face scrunches up, and it begins crying again.

“We never had time to think of a boy’s name,” Harry says quietly. He waves his wand and a chair appears behind him. He scoots it close to Hermione’s bed.

Hermione looks up at Harry. “I—I told you I didn’t like any of the other names because I had already chosen one,” she admits. “I didn’t want

to tell you, because if it was a girl—well, then it wouldn't matter.” She hesitates. “If you don't want to name him this—then we don't have to.”

“What did you have in mind?”

Hermione smiles a little. “James,” she says softly.

Harry looks down at the child again, his vision blurring. He rests his head on the side of Hermione's bed, and he starts to cry. Pain shoots through his heart as his shoulders shake violently. “I wish they were here,” he says shakily.

Hermione's hand finds his on the bed. “Oh, Harry, they *are* here. Can't you feel them?” She lifts his head. “They're in this room right now. And they're proud of you. So proud of you.” She smiles, her eyes also glistening.

Harry closes his eyes. A flash of green light. A high-pitched scream. And then ... his parents' faces. They're smiling.

“Can you feel them?” Hermione repeats in a whisper.

“He's pretty cute,” Ron allows as James curls his small hand around Ron's thumb. He studies Hermione concernedly. “How are you feeling?”

Hermione leans back onto the pillows. “Better than I did yesterday.”

“So labour *is* as bad as everyone says it is?”

“A lot worse. Even with Harry performing all those pain-relief charms ... they didn't really seem to have an effect. It's like it's *supposed* to hurt or something.”

Ron shifts uncomfortably in his seat. “Um -”

“I'm sorry. Too much information?”

“Yes,” Ron says, laughing. “I mean, no offence. I really do respect it, but—well, we men don’t need to hear about that.”

Harry wanted to hear about it. He wanted to know every single little detail, and if there was anything he could do to make me feel better.

Hermione shakes her head.

She just can’t get him out of her head.

He went downstairs to get himself some coffee about a half hour ago, to give her and Ron some privacy.

She has missed him every moment he’s been gone.

“Ron,” she says slowly, “why do you think we—I mean you and me—why we never worked out?”

She really is curious. She’s not trying to dredge up the past, but she just wants to know. Why some couples that shouldn’t be together end up working and couples that should be together never last. Why for some people, opposites attract really works, and some people need a bond with someone who feels the same way about everything. Why –

“Well, isn’t it obvious? You were already in love with Harry.”

Hermione closes her eyes. “Ron, please -”

“No, I mean it,” Ron says, leaning forward. “I know this is going to sound like I’m a bloody lunatic, but—when we were dating, please don’t get me wrong, it was wonderful. But -” He hesitates. “I could tell that it wasn’t going to last. I think you could, too. There was something there, yes, but not—not something that could *keep* us together.” Ron smiles. “You remember the last battle, when you and Harry were talking? I—I was too nervous to talk about anything, but I remember listening to every word. And—it wasn’t the fact that you both said the word ‘love’ or anything like that. But there was something I couldn’t quite describe in your tone of voice that was different. And I think it just hit me—I’m not supposed to be with Hermione. I tried to shrug off the feeling for a while, but I just couldn’t. And—well, you know the rest.”

“Why didn’t you tell me all of this before? When—when we *ended*?”

“Well, would you have believed me if I told you I was ending our relationship because there might possibly have been something going on with you and Harry?”

Hermione laughs. “Probably not.”

“I don’t think I was even positive it was Harry you were supposed to be with. I just—I knew whoever you were going to end up with, it wasn’t going to be me.”

“I loved you, Ron,” Hermione says softly. “I mean, I still do, but -”

“I know,” Ron says. “I loved you, too.” He clears his throat and looks away, but Hermione thinks she can see a glimmer of a tear in his eyes. “It looks like even with all of this—this undeniable proof, you and Harry still haven’t got it all figured out.”

“Ron -”

“Oh, don’t try to deny it anymore, it’s pathetic.” He leans forward. “Why are you trying to hide it?”

Because I’m afraid.

“I just -”

The door opens, and Harry walks in. His eyes light up when he sees James sleeping, and he smiles. “How’s he doing?” he asks, pulling up a chair next to Ron.

“He’s fine,” Hermione says, rocking the baby back and forth a little.

“And how are *you* doing?”

“Fine,” Hermione repeats.

“Anything I can get you?”

“No, Harry, I’m fine thanks.”

Ron stands up. "I need to get going," he says, putting on his cloak. "I'm already going to be a wee bit late for Quidditch practise." He shrugs. "It was worth it." He claps Harry on the back and leans forward, kissing Hermione's forehead. "You take care of yourself, all right?" With one last look at the three of them, he leaves.

"I talked to your dad. That's what took me so long."

"Oh? What did he have to say?"

"That he loved you, and that he was proud of you, and that once those bloody doctors let him, he'll be over to see you."

And a few other things, Harry adds to himself silently.

"Oh, I do hope he doesn't leave early," Hermione says fretfully. "He -"

"Hermione, he's going to be fine. I made him promise not to leave until the doctors were positive he was ready."

Hermione smiles, relaxing a little and closing her eyes. "Thank you, Harry."

"Do you want me to leave, so you can sleep?" He stands up.

Hermione reaches out for him. "No, please, I'm just resting. I want you to stay. Please?"

Harry sits back down, smiling as he watches James snuggle closer to his mother. "He's quite cute, you know. Of course, that's because he's got such a gorgeous father." Hermione scoffs. "Yes, I'm sure that's it," she says sarcastically.

"Ouch," Harry says in a hurt voice. "Stab me in the heart, why don't you?"

Hermione laughs.

"I've never been so insulted in my life." "Yes you have," she insists. "Remember what Jane said after—what, your fourth date?"

“Can we *not* talk about that relationship? Not that there really ever was one, but -”

“I’m sorry, Harry,” Hermione mimics. “But your mouth is just too big for me. And I don’t like your nose.” “I don’t understand how a mouth can be *too big* for someone else! Honestly! And what—because my nose had been broken, she couldn’t possibly ignore it?”

Hermione studies the slight bump in Harry’s nose. One of Voldemort’s spells had smashed a rock into Harry’s nose. She had called out a spell from her position thirty feet away to stop the blood from flowing, but the nose had never been fully fixed. It’s actually quite cute, she thinks. “I like it,” she says.

He touches it with his hand. “Ending a relationship for having a small, physical flaw,” he mutters. “Honestly.” He shrugs his shoulders. “Well, I didn’t like her mouth, either.”

Hermione stiffens.

“She talked too much,” Harry says with a grin.

“I talk a lot too, you know!” Hermione protests.

“Well, yeah, sometimes—but not like Jane did. I’d be lucky if I got in twenty words over dinner.”

“Well, with Krum, I *had* to do most of the talking,” Hermione says. “And when he *did* talk, I couldn’t understand half of what he was saying.” She shakes her head. “That was such a hopeless relationship.”

Harry smiles. “You amazed all of us, at the Yule Ball,” he says without really thinking. “With your hair and your robes—you looked completely different.” He pauses. “You looked beautiful.”

“Ron was so furious with me,” Hermione comments.

“Yeah, he was. I knew that he liked you—he hadn’t admitted it yet, not even to me—he just kept getting redder and redder. And then you came over -”

“We had such a love/hate relationship.”

“A much larger emphasis on the ‘hate’ portion of it, I think. It definitely toned down once you guys started dating, but -”

“Well, not everyone can be as perfect as you and Ginny were.”

“Ginny and I weren’t *perfect*,” Harry says. “We were two strong-willed people, and neither of us could handle that much intensity.”

Hermione hesitates. “Harry, did you ever—with her, did you—well, erm, did you -”

“Have sex?”

Hermione nods. *Why did I ask that question?* she asks herself angrily.

Harry studies Hermione’s face, and for a split second, she thinks he might say yes.

But he doesn’t. He shakes his head. “No,” he says finally. ‘We didn’t.’

“So I was -” Hermione wills herself to stop talking. “I was your -”

“Yes, you were my first time,” Harry says, a small smile playing across his lips. “And my second, I guess.”

Suddenly, Mr and Mrs Weasley and Mrs Granger barge in. Mrs Weasley practically lets out a shriek of delight when she sees the baby nestled in Hermione’s arms. “Oh my goodness. How *adorable*,” Mrs Weasley practically shouts. James stirs, letting out a cry. Hermione rocks back and forth. “Oh, I’m so sorry, Hermione, I didn’t mean to wake him up.”

Mrs Granger strokes the baby’s head until he stops crying, and then bends down and kisses Harry’s cheek. “Oh, congratulations! Hermione, your father wanted me to tell you -”

“That he’s coming as soon as those bloody doctors let him out?”

“Yes,” Mrs Granger says, surprised. “How did you know?”

“Harry already talked to him.”

“You did? I didn’t—oh well. How are you feeling?”

“Fine, mum. Honest,” she insists when her mother looks at her doubtfully. “Much better than right after.”

Mrs Granger studies the baby. “Hello, James,” she whispers. He stares back at her. “I’m your grandmother.” She smiles and remarks, “He’s got the Granger nose.”

Hermione nods, and Harry grins. “I told Hermione he’ll probably get her teeth, too,” he says.

Mrs Granger laughs. “They *were* rather large,” Hermione allows. “You and dad were so angry with me when you found out that I got them fixed.”

“Well, of course we *were*!” Mrs Granger says. “We’re *dentists*, darling.”

“What did you name him?” Mr Weasley asks, kissing the top of Hermione’s head.

Hermione and Harry smile at each other. “James,” they say in unison.

Harry sits down on the couch and puts his face close to month-old James’s face. The baby coos delightedly. Hermione walks into the room carrying two mugs of tea, and she watches Harry as he makes faces at the baby. James reaches out and grabs Harry’s nose. Harry lifts his head and catches Hermione watching him. “I think he’d prefer to have my nose,” he teases. “It’s much better than yours.”

“Oh, stop it, you self-absorbed wally!” Hermione scolds, a grin on her face as she sits down in the chair facing the couch. “If you say that one more time, I *will* curse you.”

“What, while I have an innocent baby in my arms? How heartless of you, Hermione.”

“Well, he’s nearly asleep—at least, he *would* be if you didn’t keep getting him excited—and then you’ll have to put him down, and you’ll have no protection.” She sets Harry’s tea on the table next to him.

Harry repositions James and takes the mug in his free hand. “I’m terrified,” he says sarcastically.

“Oh, you should be.”

Harry leans back and closes his eyes. “I’m *exhausted* is what I am,” he announces.

“You and me both,” Hermione says, sipping her tea.

“I swear, I think he’s more awake at night than during the day.”

“It’s because he can’t *bear* to be away from you for more than a couple of hours.”

“It’s probably true,” Harry says, opening his eyes again and looking down at James. “I think I should lay him down now.” He stands up, setting down his mug and walking slowly into the small room they’ve added, between his and Hermione’s. He puts James down carefully into his crib, tucking a blanket around him. He bends over and kisses the top of James’s forehead before padding back down the hallway to the living room. He collapses onto the couch.

“How was work?”

“Long,” Harry groans. “How was at-home work?”

Hermione shrugs. “Fine. I think I spent more time sleeping than doing my actual work, but -”

“Give yourself a break, Hermione,” Harry says gently. “You just had a baby a month ago.”

“I know, but -”

“But *nothing*. I think you’re handling everything just fine. And you’ll get back into it when you’re ready.”

Hermione nods, deeply touched. “Are you hungry?” she finally asks after a few moments.

“Starving,” Harry says.

Hermione gets up. “I’ll make dinner,” she says.

“No, Hermione, let me -”

“I want to, Harry.”

“Well, so do I.” Harry gets up off the couch.

Hermione smiles. “Fine. We’ll do it together. All right?”

Harry nods, wandering into the kitchen. “What do you want to eat?”

Hermione opens the refrigerator and studies the contents. “Erm, sausage?”

Harry joins her and takes out the package of sausage, and a box of small red potatoes. “Boiled potatoes?”

Hermione opens the freezer. “Peas?”

Harry grins. “Excellent,” he says.

“Good night, Harry.”

“Good night, Hermione.”

She shuts her door, pressing her back against the wood and breathing deeply. Sighing, she starts to undress. She pulls her nightdress over her head. She doesn't want to leave this place. Not now, not ever. They've been putting off talking about it, but it's inevitable, isn't it? Once the baby's old enough, she'll move back into her much smaller apartment (which is being rented out by one old couple or another) ... and then what? She'll bring James over every other day to be with his father? Is that how it's going to be?

Whatever Harry might have said before the baby, he seems to have forgotten. In fact, things have gone more or less back to normal. He's just Harry again, and he sees her as ... just Hermione. But that's not what she wanted. She wanted to say it back, but the contractions were so painful, and she just couldn't get it out. It's obvious, though, that he regrets what he said and he's trying to bury it in the past. Right?

"Stop it," she commands herself aloud, in a whisper. She's done this to herself every single night since James was born. She did it in the hospital, tossing and turning on her incredibly uncomfortable bed, turning things over and over in her mind ...

She opens a window and collapses onto her bed. She flicks her wand, and the baby monitor in her room goes on. Ron laughed at them when she and Harry told him they had purchased one for every room. "Muggle contraptions," he scoffed. "What good'll it do?" They had laughed, too. Maybe it was a tad bit excessive.

Ron. His words kept echoing over and over in her head.

Well, isn't it obvious? You were already in love with Harry ...

It looks like even with all of this—this undeniable proof, you and Harry still haven't got it all figured out ...

No, they didn't.

And it didn't seem to her like he really wanted to figure it out.

Harry rolls onto his side. It's inexplicably hot for June, and he's not really sure why he *still* has a blanket on top of him. He kicks it off, rubbing his forehead.

He'd love nothing more than to just *sleep*. James wakes up several times in the night, and he's been sleeping for a long stretch. Harry should be taking advantage of this. But he can't. He doesn't know why.

Oh, of course he does. Who is he trying to fool? He can't trick himself into thinking he doesn't feel anything.

It's not fair. He said it, made himself look like an idiot, and now, Hermione's just pretending it never happened. And sure, it's nice to not have all of those awkward pauses and such, like they did before James was born, but ... he didn't want it to go away completely.

Mr Granger had asked him to make him a promise. *"Maybe this is a bit forward of me, but I don't really mind how uncomfortable it makes you. I know you're in love with my daughter. Hermione—she never knows what it is she wants until she's already lost it, Harry. And I know she loves you. She doesn't have to say it aloud—I can see it in her eyes. She's just afraid of—of letting herself go. Trusting her heart, not her brilliant mind. You need to make her see that. Promise me you'll make her see that."*

He promised, but ... how can he make he see it? How on earth is that possible?

Harry sighs heavily. He wishes he could just stop *thinking*. Just one night of no thinking whatsoever. Give his brain a rest. Please. Stop her face from coming before his eyes. Can any magic cure this? Any charms he could chant, to stop himself from feeling this way? An anti-love potion? Anything at all?

But he knows, even if he could, he wouldn't trade these feelings. Not for anything.

James starts crying at 2:37 exactly. Hermione knows because she's been watching the clock for the last forty-two minutes, counting out the seconds, as though she were counting sheep, only it's not helping her sleep, really.

She gets up, forgetting to put on her dressing-robe, and walks out into the hallway at the same time Harry does. He opens the door, and Hermione walks in, lifting James into her arms. "Shh," she whispers. "It's all right." She rocks back and forth.

Harry looks over her shoulder. "He slept for a while," he comments.

"Do you think he's hungry?"

Harry shakes his head. "He had plenty when I fed him," he says.

James's cries are slowly subsiding. He sniffs a little bit, clinging to Hermione's hair. He pulls at it.

"Ow, ow ..."

Harry carefully extracts James's fingers from Hermione's hair, offering his finger. The baby wraps his hand around it, blinking a couple of times. They stand in silence for a few minutes, watching the baby slowly fall asleep. Hermione carefully places him back into his crib, tucking the blanket around him. She and Harry quietly exit the room, shutting the door behind them.

"Speaking of hungry," Harry says as he walks into the kitchen. "Do you want anything?"

"Sure," Hermione says, opening one of the cabinets. "Crackers and cheese sound all right?"

Harry nods, opening the refrigerator and pulling out a block of cheese. He takes a knife, slicing a few thick chunks.

"Don't do that on the counter, Harry!" Hermione says, laughing.

"Why not?"

“You’ll scratch it all up. You have to use a *cutting board*.”

“I don’t care how many marks get on this counter. I’m sure I can wave my wand and it’ll be fine. I am a wizard, you know.”

“Are you serious?” Hermione smiles. “I had no idea.” She bites her lip as she watches him put the cheese onto a plate. She grabs a couple of handfuls of crackers, putting them on the plate next to the cheese.

They sit down at the table, eating in silence.

“How did you sleep prior to this incident?” Harry asks Hermione finally.

Hermione shrugs. “Erm, fine. And you?”

“Oh, fine,” says Harry.

Liars.

“It’s Sunday,” Hermione muses.

“Thank goodness,” Harry says, picking up the empty plate and carrying it to the sink. “One more day of work and I would have screamed.”

Hermione studies his back. Remembers what it felt like under her hands. Smooth and strong and ...

She closes her eyes.

“Harry ... you remember ... well-”

Harry scrubs the dish and dries it off. He turns back to Hermione, who’s still trying to get a sentence out of her mouth. “Remember what?”

She sighs. “Never mind.”

“No, what?”

Hermione looks away. “I can’t really remember what I was going to say.”

Harry rubs his face. He knows exactly what she was talking about. And he knows she does, too. "Well, I'm going to go to bed." He turns away. "If you remember, you can tell me in the morning, all right? I mean, a decent hour of the morning, I guess."

She watches him walk towards the hallway. He can't leave. She panics, standing up. She's ready to follow him all the way back to his room if she has to. She'll beg him to stay with her. She opens her mouth, closes it again. And then ... she just says it.

"I love you, Harry."

He stops, and turns around slowly.

She's not afraid anymore. "I love you," she repeats.

He doesn't say anything.

Nothing at all.

She swallows, hard. Tears are stinging her eyes. Why isn't he saying anything back. "Right," she says, trying to keep the tremble out of her voice. "Well, I'm going to go to bed now." She starts to walk past him. "I'll see you in the -"

He grabs her shoulders, pulling her back to him. She keeps her eyes on his chest, willing the tears already falling down her cheeks to stop. But they won't.

Slowly, carefully, Harry leans his face forward, kissing each tear on Hermione's cheek. And then his lips find hers, and she forgets about breathing. She holds onto him tightly, clinging to him, because now that he is hers, she just can't let him go. Harry pulls her body closer to hers, breaking apart only for a second to whisper, "I love you, Hermione." She smiles and kisses him again, a gloriously beautiful kiss filled with hope.

Harry lifts Hermione carefully onto the kitchen table, but she pulls away from him carefully. "Harry," she says quietly.

"Yes, Hermione?"

“Will you—I mean, can you promise me that -”

“Hermione, look me in the eyes.” Harry holds her chin, resting his forehead against hers. “I will never hurt you. Do you understand me? *Never.*”

She nods slowly, biting her lip. “I love you, Harry.”

“I love you, too, Hermione.” He kisses her gently. “I always will.”

She studies his eyes, searching for some falter, anything to tell her to stop. But there is no hesitation, only constancy in his stare.

He is the one.

Suddenly, a slow whine fills the room.

Hermione groans. “James.”

Harry sweeps her into his arms, kissing her lightly on the forehead as he walks down the hallway towards their child’s room. Hermione leans her head against Harry’s chest, her arms tight around his neck. She breathes in his scent, closing her eyes and smiling.

He sets her down carefully when they reach the room, and she opens the door. James is reaching up from his crib, reaching for them. Hermione lifts him, cradling him gently. Harry puts his arm around her waist, kissing her neck. The warmth of his breath sends a shiver down her spine, and she lifts her face to his. They smile at each other and look down at their baby.

A family.

A/N: Well, here we are at the end. Thank you all for joining me on this ride.

Thank you also for your reviews. They’ve been helpful, honest, even if it seems like I’m not paying attention to them all the time.

As for someone leaving a comment asking if I was a guy—alas, I am a female by the true name of Adelaide. Jacob Marley is the name of Scrooge's partner from *A Christmas Carol*, a nickname of sorts.

Anyway, I'll be writing more soon, I'm sure. And I'll be posting a few deleted chapters (and the lengthened Bellatrix story) gradually ...
THANKS AGAIN!